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A Terrible Deed; or, All For Gold.

BY EMMA GARRISON JONES.

CHAPTER I.

AN AWFUL CRIME.

"The way to ruin thus begins,
Down, down by the easy stairs,
If conscience suffers little sins,
Soon greater ones it bears.
Just as the broadest rivers run,
From small and distant springs,
The greatest crimes that men have done,
Have sprung from little things."

"So Flavia will give a ball, mamma?"

"Yes, on the fifteenth! Cassie, do untie my bonnet, and take my shawl, I'm tired to death. You live in such an out-of-the-world place, and your tumble-down house has such a wretched length of steep steps, it quite lays one up to make you a visit. And ring for lunch at once, child; I can't survive a minute longer without a glass of wine."

The grand old lady threw herself on the sofa, with an air of great weariness, making quite a striking picture in her black moire and exquisite lace, her lovely white hair arranged in elaborate puffs, her fair, soft hands all aglitter with diamonds.

Her daughter put aside the expensive trifle of a bonnet and the elegant cashmere shawl, and having rung for Kitty to bring up lunch, she established herself on a footstool at her mother's knees, her face full of eager impatience.

"Now, mamma, tell me all about the ball, pray do, I am so anxious to hear."

Mrs. Dunbar laughed sarcastically as she sipped her wine.

"My poor Cassie," she said, "what an interest you take in such things, and here you are imprisoned in this miserable old house, in this desolate country-place. You might have had a city mansion, and been giving balls of your own. Don't it strike you that you made a big mistake when you disobeyed your mother and married Romney Lysle?"

"Oh, mamma, don't talk of that now, pray

don't," cried the young wife, her great Oriental eyes brimming with tears. "If I was wrong, it can't be helped now, and I *did* love Romney."

"Oh—to—be—sure you loved him! Well, you've got him, my dear, I hope you enjoy him! 'All for love and the world well lost!' That sort of thing don't pay, Cassie! You should have hearkened to me, and married James Lauderdale."

"I wish I had, mamma!"

"So I thought! Tell you about Flavia's ball? Well, it will be a grand one; she can afford it, you see; she married a wealthy husband. The very best people in the city are invited, and so are you. I scarcely expected it of Flavia. I should not have blamed her if she had left you out, considering the miserable match you have made; but she wants you to come; she told me to tell you that she especially desires you to come."

"Did she, mamma?"

Mrs. Lysle's great black eyes dilated like a child's, and her cheeks flushed with pleasure. She was a superb woman, rare of face and figure, and she was Romney

Lysle's wife, and he only a book-keeper in a mercantile house in the city.

"Yes, she wants you to come," continued her mother, smoothing out the dainty lace frills at her wrists; "and that's what brought me here to-day; you *cannot* come without an appropriate outfit; Mrs. Preston would never forgive you, if you came looking shabby, nor would I. Now, the question is, have you anything suitable to wear?"

"Not a thing; my wardrobe consists of dowdy, faded rags," cried Cassie, passionately.

"Then you must have something new; let's see—a maize silk would be becoming, with a lace overdress, and you ought by all means to have a set of diamonds; your jewelry is all sadly common, and out of style; can't you manage to get these things?"

Cassie hid her face on mamma's knee, and began to sob.

"It's real unkind of Romney, that it is, considering how much I sacrificed for his sake, but I asked him for a new dress only yesterday and he denied me. He says his business affairs are embarrassed, and he can't afford to spend a dollar extravagantly."

"Oh, pooh! they all say that; he's penurious, that's all; he can afford it well enough, no doubt. In your place, I'd have them to be sure. My



"OH, POOR ROMNEY, POOR ROMNEY," SHE MURMURED, "I'M SURE HE GOT THESE THINGS FOR ME."

dear child, you don't know how to manage men."

The daughter only answered by her sobs. Her lady mother laughed again.

"Too late to cry now, child; as you've made your bed so you must lie. You wouldn't listen to me when I told you how it would be. You'd break your heart and die, if you didn't marry Romney. Well, you've married him, but a fine figure you'll cut at your sister's ball, in an old-fashioned gown, and that heavy, old Roman jewelry."

"I won't wear it," cried Cassie, passionately.

"What will you do? If you stay at home, people will imagine the truth, that you can't appear for want of genteel clothes."

"Mamma, couldn't you help me? I wouldn't have Flavia know it for the world, but I'm afraid I shall never persuade Romney to let me have the money. But if you could lend me enough, I'll pay it back some day."

"Oh, ho, lend you the money! You little idiot, I haven't got a thousand dollars in the world; if I had, a pretty fool I should be, to deny myself to gratify you. No, indeed; go to your darling Romney, that you couldn't live without."

The young wife covered her face, and tears trickled between her white fingers.

"Ha! ha! ha! what a little fool to be sure," laughed her mother, heartlessly, "mewed up in this dreary, old river-house, and not a genteel frock to your back; the very handsomest woman in the State, too; and you might have been Mrs. Lauderdale, with five thousand a year for pin money."

"Oh, mamma, don't, please. You know I hated old Lauderdale, and I loved Romney."

"To be sure I know it, and I wish you joy of your choice, but don't dare to show your face at Mrs. Preston's, unless you can come well-dressed. And now give me my bonnet, and I'll go; this old house, with the sound of the river eternally in one's ears, gives me the horrors."

Cassie fetched the bonnet, and set it above the white puffed hair, and then accompanied the handsome, worldly old lady down to her carriage.

"Mamma is right," she thought, watching the carriage as it rolled down the drive, beneath the arching cedars. "I should have married Mr. Lauderdale. I am unfit to be a poor man's wife. I hate this lonesome old house. I want to be back in the city; to have fine robes and jewels, to dance and flirt, and go to the opera. I can't endure this life. I did love Romney, but now I fancy I'm growing tired even of him."

Her superb black eyes filled with tears, and her ripe lips quivered.

"But I'll have a new silk, and a set of jewels for Flavia's ball, I will. Mamma and Flavia shan't think that Romney's too poor and mean to let me have them; and I won't go to Flavia's ball looking a fright, and she all dressed in her lace and diamonds."

Even while she uttered these passionate words, her husband appeared. She flew to meet him, and twined her white arms round his neck.

"I was this minute thinking about you, my precious. I was cross to you this morning, and I have been so sorry all day; but you will let me have the new silk, Romney? Mamma has been here, and Flavia is going to give a grand ball; and it will break my heart if I don't have something nice to wear."

"Oh, Cassandra," he said, his voice full of despair, his face worn and weary, "I hoped you would not ask me again. Dear, I gave you the last money I could spare to pay for your black silk and the new pony carriage. I wish I had it, indeed I do, my wife."

"I know you do, and you'll get it somehow, I'm sure you will," and her soft, rich lips touched his, her bewitching eyes glowed upon him like stars, "I must have a nice dress, and a set of jewels, Romney."

"Great heaven! Cassandra, how can I get them for you; I've told you I've got no money."

She threw him from her, her eyes flashing fire. "You might get it; borrow it, only you don't care; your mean, and penurious; and you want to keep me shut up in this old house till my heart breaks; I wish I had never seen you; I wish to my heart I had married Mr. Lauderdale."

The poor, pale, over-worked man fairly cowered before her.

"Oh, Cassie," he said, "I had not dreamt that you could be so heartless; I wish I could gratify you, I do indeed. I'm not miserly; it is utterly out of my power. Listen to me, Cassie, come nearer, and hear what I never meant to tell you. We have been living beyond our means for the last two years; you wanted the carriage and ponies so, and I hated to deny you; and—and—Cassie, I used money that didn't belong to me. I didn't intend to steal, heaven knows; I meant to replace it, and I have succeeded in part. But don't you see, dear, that I can't spare a dollar? I must put it all back before Mr. Selby returns from Europe, or I shall be found out, and ruined and disgraced for life."

She laughed scornfully in his face.

"You've embezzled, have you? Well, some five or six hundred dollars, more or less, won't make your crime one whit worse, and I must have a set of jewels."

"Why, great heavens! I can't raise what I've already used; would you have me take more? Would you have me sell my honor for your miserable trinkets?"

"You've no honor to sell, or you would never have duped me into marrying you."

"You knew I was a poor man, Cassie; and I thought you loved me."

"Fiddlesticks! When poverty comes in at the door, love flies out at the window. I wish from the bottom of my heart I was James Lauderdale's wife this very night."

"Heaven knows, I wish so too!"

He turned on his heel and left her, and, instead of entering the house, retraced his steps in the direction of the city.

His wife stood on the long, windy portico, watching the sun going down behind the glittering spires of the distant city. Her passionate eyes did not soften; she felt no pity or remorse for what she had done. Her early training in the home of a worldly mother told well.

"I loved him so, and sacrificed all my prospects for his sake," she said, "and this is my reward. Since he has used some of the firm's money, where would have been the harm of using a little more? I'll never forgive him! Only to think how mamma and Flavia will laugh at me! I wish I were dead!"

Yet, flat in contradiction of this assertion, she went down in answer to Kitty's bell, and eat her dinner with quite as much relish as if her husband had been with her, instead of being driven out mad, and desparate, by her heartlessness.

Dinner over, she repaired to her own room and employed herself in taking an inventory of her finery. Silks, tulles, ribbons and flowers were tossed about in elegant confusion.

"Not one thing fit to wear—a tawdry, old-fashioned lot," she said, disdainfully; "why, Flavia wouldn't be caught wearing the best of them. Ah, dear me, Flavia was a sensible woman, and I a fool. She's got a husband worth his tens of thousands, and she's a 'fright' compared to me."

She turned to the old-fashioned mirror, that reflected her beautiful face and perfect figure, lithe and full of grace as the limbs of a young pantheress.

"I am beautiful," she sighed, the color burning in her cheeks, her eyes like stars; "but what does Romney care? He'd as soon dress me in a shilling print as the finest lute-string! and bury me in this old house from one year's end to another. But I won't submit to it; he's married me, and he shall pay for his prize. I will have elegant apparel, and jewels, no matter at what cost! I won't have mamma and Flavia making fun of me."

The old saw runs true. Speak of the devil, and he's sure to appear!

The bell rang, there was a roll of wheels below, and looking from the window, Mrs. Lysle beheld her sister's elegant equipage.

"Oh, dear me, there's Flavia now; and only look at her clothes! That silk stands alone, and her shawl cost a thousand, I'll bet. She puts on her best things when she comes here, just to aggravate me, hateful thing!"

With which sisterly remark she turned and ran down to the parlor.

"My dear Cassie, how do?" and Mrs. Preston turned a rouged cheek to receive Cassie's kiss; "I've been out shopping the live-long day, and I thought I must run by and tell you about my ball; it comes off on Thursday."

"Yes, mamma's been here; she told me."

"Ah, I didn't know. But I want you to come, Cassie, and more, I want you to look your best; it wouldn't do for you to stay away; our set would think you'd make a worse marriage than you have; and you must not look shabby. What will you wear?"

"Tell me what you will wear, first."

"Oh, I've got one of Worth's dresses. Preston ordered it himself from Paris. It's a gem, you may be sure, and the cost was fabulous. He's got me a new set of diamonds, too, the most elegant things you ever set eyes on. He's awfully extravagant, Preston is, but he can afford it, you see, and thinks nothing on earth too good or too costly for me."

Cassandra winced, and tears of passionate anger filled her eyes.

"You'll have to get a new silk, and I should think a set of jewels," continued her sister.

"Of course, I shall; Mr. Lysle and I were consulting this morning about what sort of silk I must get," replied Cassie, her pride and anger both up; "he fancies mauve, but maize is my choice."

"You're right; maize let it be; it just suits your complexion, and you must have a handsome lace overdress, and a set of diamonds."

"I don't know about diamonds. I saw some pearl and opal sets at Doffrafield's that I very much admired."

"Oh, dear, yes, they're pretty, I'll admit, but diamonds are the thing, Cassie. No thoroughbred woman ever attends a ball without diamonds, and my ball will be a grand one; and all the *creme de la creme*, you see, and I want you to do me credit; you take my advice and get diamonds; they'll cost a trifle more, to be sure, but your husband won't object to that, will he?"

"Oh, dear, no; Romney never objects to any wish of mine."

"Very well; get maize silk and diamonds, and you'll look resplendent; and by the by, Lauderdale's to be there, and Harry Napier. You'll have a chance to break their hearts afresh. And now I must go; it is long past my dinner hour, and I'm half dead. You'll get the diamonds to-morrow; run by and let me see them, and I'll let you have some lace."

"Oh, thank you. I have quantities of lace."

"Have you? Nice real lace? Oh, well, good-bye, now."

The rouged cheek was held up and kissed again, and then Mrs. Preston went down to her carriage, and was driven away.

Cassandra Lysle threw herself upon the sofa, in the old-fashioned parlor, and sobbed aloud in passionate grief and anger.

"What shall I do now? What brought Flavia here? I almost hate her, if she is my sister; I shall die of mortification if Romney refuses to let me have the jewels; but I will have them, I will, by fair means or foul."

She rose erect, and stamped her pretty foot upon the floor, all the worst passions in her heart aroused.

All her life, and it was only the brief span of twenty-one summers, the evil in Cassie Lysle's heart had been fostered, the good crushed out. Vain, passionate, proud, and cruel, she yet possessed an ardent temperament, and when, in defiance of all her friends could say, she married Romney Lysle, she loved him; but even that love which might have redeemed and purified her soul, was being choked and killed by the rank growth of viler passions.

Day by day, step by step, this fair winning woman, strayed into the forbidden ways of sin, until her heart was hardened, and her womanly delicacy blunted and her soul made capable of actual and absolute crime.

Where there is a will, as the old saw runs, there is always a way. If Satan finds that we are willing to do his bidding, he generally gives us a chance.

Cassandra Lysle was just in the temper to succumb to any devil's temptation, and her devil's temptation came.

While she sat nursing her ill-temper, and waiting for her husband's return, that she might make another effort to force him to consent to her wishes, the kitchen girl came in with lights.

"Miss Cassie," she said, "there's a peddler on the porch who says he's got jewelry to sell; must I fetch him in?"

"Jewelry," echoed Mrs. Lysle, "but of course it's nasty pinchbeck stuff; but, let him come in, Kittie, we'll see what he's got anyhow."

The peddler was brought in; a small, keen-faced foreigner.

"What have you got to sell?" demanded Cassie.

"Jewels, madam, diamonds. Ah, you need not smile, I don't mean brass set with bits of red and white glass, but real gems, diamonds of the first water, that once belonged to a crown princess."

"And how in the world did you come by them?"

"I'll tell you. Before I left the old country, my grandmother died; she was a very grand old lady, madame, and lived in an old chateau, but she was poor, her money all gone, nothing left but these diamonds. She died, and left them to me; and I came over the sea, and fetch them with me, and now I want to sell them to some beautiful lady like yourself, for money, to bring my wife and little ones over."

A very plausible story," laughed Mrs. Lysle; but let me see them."

He turned to the table, and unclasped a small, black case which he carried in his hand. Within it was a casket, which he threw open.

Cassie started to her feet with a cry of delight. The room was in a shimmer of reflected light from the gleaming stones.

Necklace, wristlets, and ear-rings, all of exquisite workmanship and wondrous brilliancy.

"Why, they *are* real diamonds," she cried in amazement, "and so beautiful."

"Real diamonds to be sure; didn't I tell you so, lady? Now, wouldn't you like to buy them cheap?"

"What do you call cheap?"

"Fifteen hundred dollars, not one half their value."

"Oh, dear! I could never give that much."

"That's a small sum to pay for a set of diamonds, madame; you'll never have such a chance again."

Mrs. Lysle did not answer. She was fingering the jewels with caressing touches, thinking all the while: "Oh, if they were mine, if I could only have them to wear to Flavia's ball."

The peddler eyed her keenly.

"Suppose you take them out, and put them on," he said artfully; "you can judge better of them then."

She took them out with trembling hands, and standing before the mirror, twined them amid her raven curls, and about her lovely, dusk throat.

"Oh, how glorious they are," she panted; "how beautiful they make me."

"As beautiful as a queen," said the man, "I have never seen a woman, until now, worthy to wear them. Wait till your husband comes, (the servant said he was out), let him see you wear them, and he'll buy them for you without a word."

Cassie sat down with a tremor of excitement.

"I'm afraid not; but I'd risk my life to possess them; if you are willing to wait, I think my husband will be in soon."

She removed the jewels, and laid them in a shining heap upon the table. The peddler returned them to the casket, and then sat down.

"Would you like to have your dinner?" asked Mrs. Lysle.

He answered in the affirmative, and was sent into the dining-room to Kitty, but took good care to carry his precious casket with him.

Hours went by, and still Cassie's husband did not return. Her patience deserted her at last.

"He won't come, there's no use in waiting longer; I must go to bed; will you remain till morning?"

"Gladly, madame, if you'll allow me to sleep here on the sofa."

"You can have a bed."

"No need, I'll lie right here, and put my diamonds under my head for a pillow."

Mrs. Lysle looked back, as she left the room, and saw him stretched full length on the sofa, the black case underneath his head.

"If they were mine—oh, if only they were mine," she murmured, as she ascended the stairs.

"If they were only mine," she repeated, sitting down by her chamber window, "wouldn't I make mamma and Flavia open their eyes? But Romney won't hear of it, I'm sure he won't; how provoking that he don't come home!"

"The night wore away. The full moon hung over the sleeping city, silvering all its spires; the wind sighed fitfully amid the poplars. At her window Cassie sat, not watching for her husband, but buried in deep thought.

As the hours crept by, a curious change came over her beautiful face; her eyes grew cold and hard, and her lips set themselves in a firm line. Once or twice she started to her feet, and then sat down again, shuddering violently. A crucifix and a touching picture of the Infant Christ hung above her bed. Once, in the far, far past, when she was little better than a baby, her father, never her mother, her father, whom she remembered as a gentle, sad-faced man, had taught her to kneel before that holy symbol, and say her evening prayer.

Somehow she remembered it now, and her father's face as it lay white and dead in the coffin. She started up with a terrified cry, and leaned out at the window.

The city lay beyond, the great, gay city, its innumerable lights blinking in the darkness.

Her thoughts flowed back into their old channel.

She sat down and thought again, her eyes gleaming, that strange, white look on her face. Then she left her room, and stole down the stairs like a phantom.

The parlor door was ajar, and there on the sofa lay the peddler fast asleep.

Kitty was in her bed, the old house as silent as a tomb, but for the drowsy flow of the river that ran beneath its rear windows.

Cassandra Lysle stole back, not to her own room, but to a small reading-room communicating with the parlor. It was lighted by one long, low window, and beneath this was a little ridge of green, and far below the black, swift stream.

She looked at the bank, at the window, then back at the sleeping peddler, and a cruel, tigerish light lit her great, Oriental eyes, until they took on a brassy glare.

"I could do it, I'm sure I could," she muttered, her white teeth set hard, her white hands clenched, "he's a small man, and I am strong, and his body once down there, who would ever know?"

The black river flowed on, the solemn stars looked down, and within the unconscious stranger slept.

The woman crept back to her chamber, and crouched down in a corner like some wild thing at bay. The last few hours had changed her utterly; the devil's temptation, in her soul, looked out of her very eyes, and gave her limbs the motion of a pantheress that meditates a spring. She crouched down, and buried her face in her hands. The crucifix gleamed in the lamplight, the Infant Christ smiled down from his Virgin Mother's arms—she took no heed.

An hour went by; she heard the city clocks and bells striking one. She arose again, and going to a sort of cabinet, took out a long, bright dagger.

An odd sort of weapon it was, with a curious, twisted hilt, kept by her husband as an heirloom.

She passed the keen, glittering blade through her white fingers, and a smile that was terrible to see parted her whitening lips.

"No one will ever know, and he'll do as well dead as alive, and I shall have the diamonds," she muttered.

She hid the weapon in her bosom, and crept down the stairs. At the parlor door she paused and listened intently.

Not a sound broke the silence. She looked in, and by the dim light, saw the peddler still lying on the sofa, fast asleep.

She crossed the hall on tiptoe, and bolted the front door, in order to prevent the entrance of her husband, should he chance to come and use his latch-key. Then she stood still and listened again. No sound but the wind in the poplars and the flow of the river.

"I could do it, and the diamonds would be mine," she said, in a hissing sort of whisper; "I could tell Flavia that Romney bought them, and make Romney think them a present from mamma, and no one would ever know."

Once more she drew the dagger from her breast, and gripped her white fingers about the twisted hilt. Her face grew ashen white, her eyes gleamed like fire. She crept to the parlor door again, and entered. The man upon the sofa lay

upon his back, one arm thrown over his head, breathing heavily.

Like a tigress she crept across the room, her right arm was upraised, and without hesitation or tremor, she struck the fatal blow. The keen blade sunk deep into the man's chest, just below the heart; there was a sharp, gasping cry, he struggled over, and fell upon his face on the floor.

The murderess covered her eyes with her hands, and fled towards the door.

"What have I done?" she gasped.

But, almost in the same breath, she overcame her horror and terror, and darted back.

"The deed is done, and the diamonds are mine," she whispered.

And with shaking hands she tumbled aside the overcoat that lay folded on the sofa, and searched for the black case which contained the gems. It was not there. A cry of rage escaped her white, foam-flecked lips. She flew at the murdered man, lying motionless at her feet, and turned him over. The blade of the dagger broke off with a sharp snap; the blood spurted from the wound, covering her hands and dress; the white ghastly face was clearly revealed in the dim light.

A shriek, like the cry of a lost soul, rang through the silent, old house. The miserable woman wrung her hands together.

"Oh, heaven forgive me!" she wailed out, "I have killed my husband!"

Then she fled from the parlor, closing the door behind her, and up the stairs to her own room.

"I have murdered Romney," she panted, crouching down before the hearth. "I have murdered Romney. Oh, what shall I do?"

For some minutes she did nothing but shriek and sob, and tear her hair; but, even in that supreme moment of terror and remorse, her inborn selfishness asserted itself. She grew quiet and silent and began to think.

"Kitty will come down, and my crime will be found out, and I shall be hanged," she gasped, springing up, and darting down the stairs.

The house was still silent; that wild shriek had failed to rouse Kitty in her garret chamber. Romney Lysle's wife crept on until she reached the parlor door; she pushed it open, and looked in. Her husband lay just as she had left him, his white deathly face looking upward, his limbs convulsed and rigid.

"He's dead; I've killed him," she panted, "I must save myself from the law."

Swift as thought she darted in and closed and locked the door behind her; then she seized upon the motionless body, and dragged it across the floor, and into the adjoining reading-room. The low window was open, and the flow of the river could be plainly heard.

She made no pause, uttered no word, did not even take a last look at the still face of the man she had loved; she thought of nothing but her own safety. With a strength made superhuman by desperate excitement, she got the body to the window, and forced it through, then she gave it one swift, powerful motion, and it rolled over the green ledge, and fell into the swift-flowing water below, with a heavy plash.

She leaned out, and looked after it; a few eddying circles were all she saw.

"Good-bye, Romney," she said, in a curious, strained voice, and then she closed the window, and returning to the parlor, proceeded at once to clean away the tell-tale pool of blood, and to destroy every trace of the terrible crime she had committed.

The dawn was breaking when her task was safely done, and arrayed in fresh garments, she opened the casement of her own chamber, and looked out. Sweetly and softly the tender tints kindled in the east; the birds began to stir and twitter amid the dewy poplar boughs, and the lambs to bleat in their fold.

She looked and listened, with dull introverted eyes, and deaf ears.

"I have killed Romney," she said, in a hoarse whisper; "I have sold my soul for diamonds, and they are not mine."

CHAPTER II.

THE BELLE OF THE BALL.

AT nine o'clock, according to custom, Kitty rang the bell for breakfast.

Mrs. Lysle came down in the freshest of morning wrappers, her hair elaborately crimped, her white cheeks rouged.

"Dear me, Kitty," she said, seating herself at the table, "what can have become of Mr. Lysle? he did say something about being called away on business, but surely he wouldn't go without letting us know. You must go to his office this morning and find out what has become of him. I feel dreadfully uneasy."

Kitty was sure there was no need, her master would turn up again all right; and wouldn't Miss Cassie have some of the dry toast and an egg; she was eating nothing.

Miss Cassie took everything the obliging girl offered, but failed to swallow a morsel.

"Get me a glass of wine, or brandy may be better; a little brandy and seltzer; I feel wretchedly nervous this morning."

"Poor, pretty, young thing," said the kind-hearted Kitty, as she obeyed. "She's worritting about her husband, that's what's tuk her appetite, and he off on a spree, mebbe."

Mrs. Lysle swallowed the brandy, and the rouge bloomed redder on her cheeks, and the fire in her eyes deepened.

"That will do, Kitty, I feel better; don't fail to go to the city at once; it is so strange that Mr. Lysle did not come home last night."

"Laws, Miss Cassie, don't you worrit one bit. Men's curus creatures anyways."

"So they are, Kitty; and that reminds me of that pedler. Do you know what became of him?"

"Sneaked out of the house, 'feard some one would steal his old trash, mebbe. I thought I heard a noise down here in the night. I hope he hain't took nothing as don't b'long to him."

Mrs. Lysle drew a long breath. She began to hope that her tracks were securely and effectually covered.

Kitty went to the city, and returned with the intelligence that Mr. Lysle had not been seen at his place of business since three o'clock of the previous day; and, by noon, the senior member of the mercantile firm had made Mrs. Lysle herself a visit.

He looked very grave and severe, and questioned the anxious wife in a manner that she did not at all fancy. Mr. Lysle had left his business affairs in a very tangled state, and had disappeared with money belonging to the firm in his pocket.

The young wife's great Oriental eyes flashed with indignation.

"My husband will be able to give a proper account of whatever he has done, sir," she retorted, then breaking down and sobbing hysterically, "but surely no harm can have befallen him, my poor Romney? Oh, sir, do you think so?"

The senior member could not tell, but he promised to have the matter thoroughly investigated, and drove away full of pity and admiration for the anxious wife.

"Money belonging to the firm in his pocket," repeated Mrs. Lysle, as the sound of his buggy-wheels died away.

"Heavens! what a fool I have been. I should have examined his pockets."

Instantly she flew up stairs to her own room, and exhumed her husband's overcoat, which she had hidden in a closet, and began to examine it.

It lay folded beneath his head when he received his death stab, and on one side there were a few dark spots of blood. Cassandra shuddered, and her lips grew white, but she did not abandon her search. She dived into the pockets with eager, trembling hands, and presently she came upon a bank-book. She fluttered over the leaves, and found, with a sudden cry of surprise and delight, two five hundred dollar bills.

The sight of them softened her as nothing else, not even her murdered husband's dead face, had power to do; her black eyes brimmed over.

"Oh, poor Romney, poor Romney," she murmured, "I'm sure he got these for me; he meant to let me have the jewels after all, and I've killed him; it was too bad, too bad."

She wrung her white hands in agony, and her bosom heaved with suppressed sobs.

Wheels on the gravel below, and a peal of the bell put her remorse and grief to flight. She flew to the window, saw her sister on the steps, huddled the overcoat into its hiding-place, and with the money in her pocket, the money which her poor husband had as good as stolen, rather than deny the wife he loved the baubles she coveted, she ran down to receive her.

"What, not dressed, Cassie?" cried Mrs. Preston; "why, I thought to find you all ready for your shopping expedition; and here you are in your wrapper! I was out for a drive, and the notion struck me to call by and take you into town to buy your diamonds. I am so much better a judge of such things than you are, and dealing so largely at Dorrafield's, I could get them for you something cheaper. Won't you come?"

Mrs. Lysle played with the silken cord that zoned her waist, not the slightest tremor in a single feature.

"I am at a loss what to do," she answered, reflectively; "I certainly intended to go out this morning and make my purchases, but, Flavia, the oddest thing has happened. Mr. Lysle did not come home all night, and hasn't been seen at his counting-house since yesterday."

"Dear me, that's nothing; he's left town perhaps; but I suppose you haven't the money?"

"Oh, yes, I have," replied Cassie, and her eyes actually sparkled in enjoyment of her triumph; "Romney gave me a thousand dollars yesterday morning; I suppose that will do?"

Mrs. Preston raised her eyebrows in well-bred surprise.

"A thousand dollars! Oh, dear yes, that will do; but you didn't mention having the money when I was here last evening."

"Didn't I? I really don't remember, but what am I to do? I don't feel a bit like going out; I was so troubled all night about Romney, that I scarcely slept a wink."

"Oh, you're a goose! Romney's all right! Men don't always keep us posted touching their goings and comings; he'll be at home to-night, no doubt. Run and dress at once."

Mrs. Lysle hesitated, twisting her wedding ring round and round her white finger.

"If I were sure Romney would come," she said. "I have been so dreadfully uneasy."

Mrs. Preston laughed.

"Well, you're amusing; in love with handsome husband yet, I verily believe. Don't be a silly, Cassie; run and dress; my bays are growing restive, they can't be induced to stand still."

"But if Romney should not come home to dinner, ought I to go to your ball to-night?" asked Cassie, still irresolute.

"Why, to be sure; why not? I tell you no harm has befallen your husband; you don't fancy he has been murdered, do you, in this quiet neighborhood?"

Cassie laughed, but the laugh was forced, and her lips paled and quivered as she replied.

"Dear me, no; I fancy nothing so horrible as that. Romney spoke of having to go to some place—Ottawa, I think—but 'tis strange that he should not have told me."

"Yes, a little strange, I'll admit, but he'll make it all plain when he returns. Come, run and dress, we've not a minute to lose; I've a thousand and one things to attend to this evening; and it will take us some time to select your diamonds. Be quick, and we'll drive by Drayton & Seaton's, and find out if they've had news from your truant husband."

Mrs. Lysle left the room, and proceeding to her chamber, made her toilet in a very few minutes.

"Let us call at Romney's place first of all," she said to her sister, as they entered the carriage, "I am so dreadfully anxious."

And to Romney's counting-house they went. Mr. Drayton, the senior partner, received them, and told the young wife, his eyes full of pity and admiration, that they had not heard a word in regard to her husband; there were matters, however, he added, of a very important nature, touching Mr. Lysle's business, which demanded immediate attention, and if she would be at leisure that afternoon, he would make her a visit, and try to make them clear to her.

"The business matters? Dear me, Mr. Drayton, I shall never comprehend them; I never could understand business matters; all the same, I beg

that you will come, and I feel sure that you will help me."

And the great Oriental eyes looked out at the old merchant, bright with unshed tears.

"Poor thing; poor, pretty creature. It's a sad blow to fall on so bright a head. Yes, yes, I must try to help her."

Meanwhile the two sisters were driven to Dorrafield's, and the diamonds were purchased—a pretty, stylish set, costing six hundred dollars.

Mrs. Lysle returned home and found her dinner waiting.

"No news from Mr. Lysle yet, Kitty?" she asked, as she sat down, with the diamonds in her pocket.

"No, Miss Cassie; none yet. Shall I fetch up the dinner?"

"Yes, Kitty; 'twill do no good to wait, and I'm dreadfully hungry."

So Kitty brought up the dinner, and Mrs. Lysle actually found herself capable of enjoying it, though the swift flow of the river could be plainly heard through the open window.

She had her diamonds; and even at that early hour the sharp edge of her horror and remorse was pretty well worn off. Once in a while her tears would rise, and her bosom heave, as she thought of Romney; but on the whole, she wondered to find herself so well contented in so short a time.

The way of the transgressor is hard, but not at the outset. Once in the downward way, our feet glide on so easily. When we harden our hearts and set ourselves to do the devil's bidding, we find the task made easy and pleasant to our hands.

"I've got my diamonds," thought Mrs. Lysle, sauntering to the window, when her dinner was over, "but I've paid a fearful price."

She looked out, and saw the water tinged with the ruddy glow of the setting sun, and a cry of horror escaped her lips.

"It looks like blood," she whispered under her breath, "Romney's blood."

"Miss Cassie, here is Mr. Drayton in the parlor," announced Kitty.

Mrs. Lysle composed her countenance, assumed a smiling solicitude of manner, and sailed out.

"No news yet, Mr. Drayton?"

"My dear madam, no, and that's not all; we shan't hear any news in a hurry."

The lady clasped her white hands, and her black eyes filled. Some women seem to be endowed with crocodile capacities, their tears come at the bidding.

"Oh, Mr. Drayton, what can you mean? Surely nothing has"—

"No, madam, nothing has happened to your husband as yet, but I can explain the cause of his disappearance; 'tis a disagreeable thing to do, and I pity you from my heart, but you've got to know it. He's embezzled money belonging to the firm, and finding himself in danger of being discovered, he has taken himself off."

The dainty lace handkerchief went up to the bewitching eyes, and the young wife broke forth into piteous sobbing.

"Oh, my poor Romney, my poor Romney; I shall never see him again, and he was so good to me; he did it all for my sake—my darling Romney."

The old merchant was touched. A beautiful woman in distress is so apt to move a masculine heart.

"There, there, don't take it to heart so, I beg," he cried out; "we may be able to do something. Now, to pursue the legitimate course, we should put the officers of the law on his track"—

Cassie sprang up, with a pathetic cry, and threw herself at the merchant's feet.

"But you won't do it? Oh, Mr. Drayton, please, please, for my sake, forgive this one error. If you expose my husband, you'll break my heart. Oh, for my sake, forgive him!"

The old man raised the lovely lady to her feet.

"Calm yourself, my dear madam, and your request shall be granted. It would be a pity to bring disgrace on such a true and tender wife. I'll forgive Romney for your sake."

She caught his hands in hers, and kissed them over and over again.

"Yes, yes, I'll forgive him, and take him back to his old place, if he'll promise not to do wrong again, I'll put a notice in the *Herald* that he'll be sure to understand, and we'll soon have him back again, and the secret shall rest between us

two. There, there, Mrs. Lysle, try and be calm." Mrs. Lysle smiled up at him with eyes all wet with tears.

"Oh, sir, I shall never forget you, and if I live, the money shall be refunded."

"Never mind that, madam, a few hundreds, more or less, will never make or break us."

And Mr. Drayton took his leave.

"An uncommon fine woman to look at, and very seductive," he mused, driving cityward, and free from the glamour of Cassandra's presence; "and I'd lay a big wager she's to blame for the whole thing. Young and dressy and extravagant, and Romney, poor boy, couldn't find it in his heart to deny her; and, by Jove, I don't much blame him."

"That was nicely managed," said Cassie to herself, when her visitor was gone; "it would have killed me outright to have Romney's name publicly disgraced; but the old man will keep his word—he'll forgive Romney, and recall him. But he can't come," she added, with a sudden-burst of grief; "he'll never come again. Oh, I wish he could. I did not want to kill him."

She shuddered from head to foot, and throwing herself on a lounge, gave way to a perfect storm of sobs.

Kitty's voice interrupted her:

"Miss Cassie, I am ready to help you with your toilet now, and there's no time to loose."

She arose and dried her eyes.

"Oh, Kitty, I don't want to go; I'm so miserable and uneasy."

"No doubt, ma'am, but you'd better go; the ball will amuse you, and make the time pass quick, and who knows but to-morrow may bring some news from Mr. Romney."

"Ah, who knows?" she repeated, with a shudder; but she went up to her chamber, and was dressed for the ball.

In her maize silk, with point lace garniture and diamonds about her dusky throat, and on her round wrists and amid the braids and tresses of her raven hair, no eastern princess ever looked more resplendent.

She was the belle and the beauty of Mrs. Preston's drawing-rooms; no other woman was so openly admired, so eagerly sought after, and she threw her trouble and remorse to the winds, and danced and sang, and flirted with an abandon and thorough enjoyment that slightly astonished her sister.

"One would think, Cassie," she whispered in her ear, as she sat down from a waltz with her old admirer, Mr. Lauderdale, "that you had quite got over your uneasiness about Romney; I never saw you looking so gay or so handsome."

"I never felt gayer—to the winds with all care—I have paid my price, let me enjoy myself."

"Your price; why, what do you mean?"

"Nothing at all; don't bother me, Flavia," and she was off again, sailing down the glittering room, her cheeks like roses, her eyes brighter than her diamonds.

"How beautiful she is," said her mother, looking on well pleased; "Dear me, what a pity it was she threw herself away on Romney Lysle. I can scarcely refrain from hoping he may never turn up again."

"Vain hope, he'll be sure to turn up; bad pennies always do"—

Mrs. Preston's rather witty speech was cut short by the entrance of her husband, wearing a startled face.

"Flavia," he whispered, "something very dreadful has occurred; some fishermen have found Romney Lysle's body."

His wife uttered a suppressed shriek, and clutched her husband's arm.

"His body? Is he dead then?"

"Yes, drowned in the river, poor fellow. They found him down below the bridge, and have taken the body home; who will break the news to Cassandra?"

Cassandra came whirling down on her partner's arm, her diamonds twinkling like so many stars. She caught sight of the anxious group, and the rich color died out of her cheeks.

"What is it?" she gasped, tearing herself free of her partner's arm, and crossing the room.

"What has happened, Flavia?"

"Come with me, Cassie," whispered her sister.

"Try and be calm."

But the guilty woman's limbs refused to support her.

"What is it?" she demanded, her face growing livid with terror. "Speak quick! is Romney dead? have they found him?"

"Yes, my poor child," said Mrs. Preston, "they have found him?"

There was a wild, awful cry, and the beautiful belle of the ball-room, robed in her laces and diamonds, fell, face downward, in a death-like swoon.

Romney Lysle's body was found, all drenched and drowned, and so horribly mutilated about the face that his nearest friends could never have identified him but for the garments he wore, and the watch in his pocket, which was inscribed with his name. The fishermen dragged him up from the river, and he was carried home, and laid out in the old-fashioned parlor.

His young wife was mad with grief. In her ball-room robes, with jewels on her bosom and in her hair, she threw herself down beside the stark, disfigured body, and shrieked, and moaned, and wept, in a perfect abandonment of woe.

"How she loved him, poor, pretty young thing," thought the old merchant, looking on with pitying eyes, "and he did the wrong for her sake, and then took his own life rather than meet the consequences; poor fellow, poor Romney."

And when the funeral was over, and Mrs. Lysle sat white, and grief-stricken, and interesting in her flowing crepes, Mr. Drayton drove out to see her, bearing the sympathy and good wishes of the firm, and something more substantial in the shape of a well-filled purse.

The young widow received it with becoming grace and gratitude.

"I shall never forget you, sir," she faltered, pressing the merchant's hand: "your kindness will enable me to put a nice monument above my poor Romney's grave."

And in a week a handsome shaft of Italian marble marked the murdered husband's resting-place.

"I am safe now," thought the guilty wife; "my crime is hidden in his grave; no one will ever know. My poor, dear Romney! I did love him, and it was a horrible mistake to make; but after all it is something to be free again. I married once for love, but love and poverty won't thrive together, as mamma used to say; when I marry again, it shall be for money."

CHAPTER III.

A GHOSTLY FACE.

A YEAR and a half went by. The grass was growing rank and green over Romney Lysle's grave in the old churchyard, and the poor fellow's name was well-nigh forgotten.

Surmises touching the manner of his death had ceased, and the busy tongues of the village gossips clacked about more recent topics.

The old house by the river was shut up, and wholly deserted save by bats and owls, and the young widow lived in the city with her mother and sister.

"My dear Cassie," cried Mrs. Preston, on a certain April evening, bursting into her sister's apartment in full dress, "are you never coming down? Heavens above, you haven't even begun to dress, and here the guests will be coming in ten minutes. Will you send that child out of the room, and make your toilet?"

Cassandra laughed. She was sitting before the hearth, wrapped in a half-mourning dressing-gown a baby boy, not yet a year old, lying on her breast.

"Send you away, my precious; how can mamma?" she said, kissing the child till she almost smothered him. "Aunt Flavia never had a boy of her own, that's what makes her so cross and hateful."

Aunt Flavia's gray eyes flashed.

"You would have done wisely, my dear, to have followed my example," she replied, with severe gravity, "depend upon it, you are quite burden enough on the hands of your friends, there was no need of a brat; moreover, the encumbrance will assuredly injure your prospects. Men do not care to have children thrust upon them,

and with children of his own, ten to one that Lauderdale ever gives you another thought."

"Lauderdale can let it alone, then," returned Cassie, her cheeks reddening with anger; "you talk like an idiot, Flavia. The brat, as you very elegantly term my child, was not a matter of choice, but a necessity."

"By no means," interrupted the millionaire's wife; "mamma's suggestion would have done away with all the trouble. She entreated you, and so did I, to go into seclusion for a year after your husband's death. There was no need that the world should ever know of the child's existence, and we promised you it should be well cared for; but as usual, you must have your own way, and you'll go on having it to the end of the chapter, I suppose, to your own ruin, and the disgrace of your friends."

Mrs. Lysle caught her child to her breast with a sort of passionate tenderness, and kissed it repeatedly before resigning it to Kitty's arms.

When the truth was revealed to her, some short time after her husband's death, she would become a mother, she was absolutely wild for a time with angry disgust.

But with the first touch of the child's baby hands, with the first sight of his tiny face, so like his father's, her whole being underwent a change. She loved the babe with a wild, fierce, passionate sort of feeling, such as a tigress feels for her young, and a hope sprung up in her guilty soul, that by devotion to Romney's son, she might, in a measure, atone for her terrible crime.

"I'm glad I had my own way," she said, as the child was carried from the room; "I wouldn't be without my baby for the round world—not even for the chance of becoming Mrs. Lauderdale. And don't fret over my prospects, Flavia, you and mamma; I shall continue having my own way, as you say, but I shall outshine you both yet. If Lauderdale don't come to the rescue, some other eligible fellow will. I am not five-and-twenty yet, and your husband, who ought to be a judge, tells me that I am the very handsomest woman in the State."

Mrs. Preston, who was a very plain woman, flushed and bit her lips. She did not at all relish her husband's openly avowed admiration for her sister.

"My husband! Oh, pooh, you listen to all Preston's flattery. A fig for your doll-baby face. Men of culture and birth and fortune always prefer tact and grace and breeding; beauty attracts only fools; since I come to think of it, I never knew one of your really pretty women to make a good match in my life."

"Really now! Well, that accounts for the extraordinary good match that you made, I suppose, Flavia."

And Mrs. Lysle waltzed twice around the room, and then touched the bell, and settled herself in an arm-chair, preparatory to the entrance of her maid and the commencement of her toilet.

Mrs. Preston, magnificent in a lavender silk and old point, and diamonds, grew green with rage, and swept out of the room in silence.

"I declare, it is insufferable the way Cassie goes on," she said, as she entered her mother's room, "and I won't put up with it. One would think, being utterly dependent on us for the bread she eats and the clothes she wears, she would at least be civil and grateful; on the contrary, no grand duchess ever carried herself more loftily. And Preston upholds her, too, flattering her about her beauty, and all that sort of nonsense, and goodness knows, I can't see where she looks better than the common run of women, with her brown skin and gipsy eyes."

Mamma, sitting before the mirror arranging the white crimps beneath her point-lace cap, turned smilingly round.

"Oh, my dear, she's a beauty; Cassie has her failings, but she's a beauty, there's no manner of doubt about that; the sort of beauty, too, that men most admire. She takes after me, you see; she is precisely what I was at her age."

The millionaire's wife bit her lip, and her pale, gray eyes flashed angrily.

"Well, I hope her beauty will win her a second husband, and that speedily," she said, spitefully, "for I'm heartily tired of having her under my roof; she's a perpetual torment, with that horrid child that she must keep with her, to say nothing of the expense she incurs. Preston's rich, I'll ad-

mit, and can afford some little extravagance, but there's limit a to all things. Have you any idea, mamma, what her outfit for to-night costs us?"

Mamma fastened her amethyst pin, a costly trinket, and a gift from her wealthy son-in-law.

"Not less than a couple of hundreds, I should say," was her serene answer; "but don't be penurious, Flavia, that is but a drop in the ocean to your husband, and it is so important that we keep up appearances. You wouldn't have your sister appear in public badly dressed, I know?"

"Assuredly not, but there's a limit to all things; as I said, nothing suits Cassie but the best, she must have Lyons velvet, when glaze would have answered every purpose, and Preston wouldn't have objected, if she had asked for a robe of gold. However," and Mrs. Preston's severe brow cleared, "I shall not begrudge a dollar we have given her, if she only makes a proper use of her advantages, but I predict in the outset, that she'll spoil everything by her willfulness and lack of common sense. Even if Lauderdale renews his suit, and I shall be surprised if he does, since she refused to rid herself of that child, if he does, and she has a chance to become his wife, it will be just like her to run off with the coachman, and commit some equally disgraceful act."

Having delivered this sage bit of augury, Mrs. Preston sweeps out, and descends to the drawing-rooms to welcome her assembling guests; she gives an entertainment, not quite a ball, and not quite a social, but a genteel combination of the two, in honor of Mrs. Lysle's re-appearance in society.

Mamma left to herself, shakes out her graceful skirts, with a little amused laugh.

"Poor, dear Flavia, how hard it goes with her to be so plain! That's the secret of all her bitter feeling; she envies her sister's beauty, and not much wonder, as openly as Preston admires it. 'Tis a pity; her extreme ugliness, she takes after her father, poor thing! He was a horrid man to look at, but his money made up for it! Dear me," giving a last touch to the silky white crimps, a last look at the fair old face, "how comfortable we might have been if that fearful panic hadn't ruined us! However, I've managed to get on quite nicely, owing to Flavia's good marriage, and if my hopes of Cassie are realized, all will go well. I think I'll drop in and see how she looks."

The regal old lady rustles out, and is about to cross the corridor, when a stifled shriek startles her.

The next minute the door of her daughter's room flies open, and Felice rushed out in breathless terror.

"Oh, madam, quick, quick," she gasps, "my lady is dead."

Mrs. Dunbar hurries into the chamber. On the floor, all robed in her velvet and laces, lies Cassandra in a dead swoon, and scattered all about her are her diamonds, like a shower of fallen stars.

"Why, what does this mean? how did it happen?" demands the astonished old lady.

Felice struggles terribly for English words, and gesticulates in the wildest manner.

"Madam was all dressed—her velvet was grand—her lace all nice—her hair on so lovely! she tells me to fetch her jewels! I take the diamonds out, and clasp the necklace, when madam cries out, and snatches them off, and scatters them all round, and points to the window yonder! 'Look at him, look at Romney's murdered face,' she whispered, and then madam drops down, and there she lies."

"Raise her head, and put my vinaigrette to her nostrils—no water, you idiot, you'll ruin her clothing, and do not ring the bell; would you alarm the house for nothing? Mrs. Lysle has fainted, nothing more; you keep this room too close."

Mrs. Dunbar seats herself on a sofa, and gathers up her skirts, looking seriously on, while poor, terrified Felice rushes hither and thither in a panic.

At last, however, she raises Cassandra's head, and gets a pillow under it, and puts the pungent salts to her nose. The rigid limbs relax, a faint color flutters back to the death-like face, the black eyes flare open.

"Cassie, my dear, what is it? Are you ill?" asks the old lady.

For answer Cassie utters a stifled cry, and hides her eyes in the pillow.

"I saw his face! Oh, mother, I saw Romney's face," she whispers.

Mrs. Dunbar rises, and seizing her daughter's arm, gives her an angry shake.

"Get up, this instant," she commands. "Come here, Felice, and assist your mistress! Only look at your dress! what a fright it is! and I hear music below; we should have gone down half an hour ago! Flavia was right when she predicted that you'd ruin everything by your lack of common sense. Felice, stop staring like a fool, and gather up those diamonds under your feet."

Cassandra totters across the room with a wild shriek.

"Oh, take them away! take them out of my sight!" she implores, both hands pressed hard against her eyes; his face will come again; Romney's murdered face—take the diamonds away, Felice."

Felice gathers up the shining stones with shaking hands, while Mrs. Dunbar follows her daughter.

"Cassie, are you a fool?" she cries, her voice trembling with suppressed anger. "Do you wish to disgrace yourself and me, and be turned out of your sister's house? What do you mean?"

"Mamma, I saw his face at that window yonder," answers the wretched woman.

"You're an idiot. You saw no face—you only imagined it. Come, let Felice put on your diamonds, and rearrange your hair, and we'll go down."

But Cassandra starts away, with a shriek that makes the house ring the moment the diamonds touch her white wrists.

"Take them away; oh, take them out of my sight; I'll never wear them, never touch them again while I live; there's blood upon them—Romney's blood; take them away, Felice, or his face will come again. Oh, merciful heaven, look there! I see it again! his dead, murdered face!"

And she recoils to the farthest corner of the room, her shaking hand pointing towards the western window. Mrs. Dunbar turns and looks, and so does Felice, and both of them catch the flitting shadows of a white face.

The French girl rends the very air with terrified cries, and then falls headlong in a fainting-fit. The handsome old lady utters something that sounds very much like an imprecation.

"I hope she's dead, the idiot," she says, spurning the girl's inanimate body with her dainty foot; "they must have heard her in the drawing-rooms. What will Flavia say. 'Cassie,' and she fairly springs upon her daughter as she crouches in the corner, her eyes hidden in her hands, 'get up this instant, or never while I live will I forgive you. You saw nothing but the footman, or one of the servants; what makes you such a fool? Why, one would think you murdered Romney Lysle the way you go on."

"What! What! Who says I murdered Romney?" gasps the miserable woman, springing to her feet, her face livid, her teeth chattering; "it's a lie. I didn't murder him; he was drowned, they dragged him out of the river; who says I murdered him?"

"I believe in my soul you've gone mad," cries the old lady, "why every one will say it, and believe it too, if you go on this way. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, nothing. I'm quite myself now," gasps Cassie, struggling desperately for self-command. "I'm weak and nervous, and imagine all sorts of silly things, that's all. What have I said?"

"Heaven knows what you haven't said; all sorts of wild nonsense. I'm shocked at you. Only see my dress how it's tumbled, and I'm sure my hair is all out of form. And you, you look more like a lunatic than a genteel woman, and dear me, there goes Flavia's bell, warning us for the second time that we are wanted below. Shake that stupid girl, will you, and make her get up and re-arrange your dress. We must go down at once."

"So we must and will—there now. Felice, Felice, get up like a good girl. It was the footman we saw at the window, what a goose I was to let his face frighten me so; get up Felice, and make me ready to go down."

And Mrs. Lysle tries to laugh, and goes off into hysterics instead. Her mother seizes upon a flask of brandy, and pours out a wine-glass full.

"Drink it," she says, and Cassie tosses it off at a single draught.

The color comes back to her white cheeks, her limbs begin to grow steady.

Felice still shaking with mortal terror, essays to repair her disheveled toilet, and fails.

The old lady pushes her aside, with a sharp reprimand, and does it herself. She gets the shining black braids and tresses into order, shakes out the rich velvet and laces, and touches a little rouge to the changing cheeks.

"Now, that will do nicely; give me the diamonds, Felice."

Mrs. Lysle shuts her lips close to suppress a cry of terror, and shivers in every limb, as her mother clasps them on, her wide, startled eyes watching the window with furtive glances; but she makes no objection, and at last, her toilet is complete.

"Look at yourself," commands her mother, as she fastens a cluster of moss rose buds in her hair. "You are the handsomest woman I ever saw, and I've seen a good many. Now, will you go down to the drawing-rooms, and win a rich husband; or, will you make a fool of yourself and be turned out of your sister's house? for Flavia will surely turn you out, unless you do her credit to-night."

The young widow's pride takes fire. She draws a deep breath as she surveys her regal figure and perfect face.

"I don't think I shall make a fool of myself, or disgrace Mrs. Preston," she replies, and accepting her mother's arm, she sweeps down to the drawing-rooms.

They are well filled; all her old friends, and quite a number of new ones. Mr. Lauderdale, a trifle older and grayer and uglier; Harry Napier, handsome and winning and witty as ever, fresh from the Continent, and with him an illustrious personage, the lion of the day, Count Ferdinand De Boganville.

Mrs. Lysle is eagerly welcomed. An hour after her entrance she reigns queen.

Mr. Lauderdale unbends his dignity, and succumbs at once to the old witchery of her charms; Count de Boganville is introduced, and pays her the most flattering attention.

"A charming man, a very charming man to be sure, is Count de Boganville," remarks Mrs. Dunbar to her daughters, as they were separating for the night, or the morning rather, for it is far on into the "wee, sma' hours," when the company broke up, and the last carriage rolls away; "he is well bred and well read, and the name is an ancient one. I wonder if he's rich?"

Mr. Preston laughs.

"That's the all-important question," he puts in, "good birth, good qualities, not even a sounding title, can outweigh the almighty dollar. They say he's rich, with chateaux in France, and villas in Switzerland, but these French noblemen are slippery fellows to deal with, as a rule. He may be all your fancy paints him, ladies, a handsome, high-born son of the house of De Boganville, and he may turn out a cook or a coachman—there's no telling. He's in love with Mrs. Lysle, that's patent, and I give him credit for his good taste; but as a friend, I'd advise Mrs. Lysle to think twice before she accepts him. He's winning and Lady De Boganville sounds ever so well, and Lauderdale's an ugly old customer; all the same, my dears, Lauderdale's by far the best match, and if you'll take my advice, Cassie, you'll take Lauderdale for your husband."

The young widow makes no reply. She seems lost in a maze.

"Count Ferdinand De Boganville," she murmurs, reflectively, "I certainly never heard the name before, but I've seen the man himself. When was it? where was it? and who is he?"

"He's Count De Boganville, according to his own account," replies Mrs. Preston, pettishly, "and you've never seen him before to-night, Cassie and there's no use in trying to get up a mystery; let's go to bed."

And to bed they go, as the opal dawn begins to break above the eastern hills. Cassandra clasps her boy, Romney's boy, close to her heart, and falls a sleep; but her dreams are troubled. That white, cold face, as she saw it from her dressing-room window, peers down upon her through the parted curtains, her murdered husband's face. She starts up with a frantic cry, and when at last she again drops off into a feverish doze, she fancies that her sin has found her out; that the

world knows her for what she is, and Count De Boganville is her accuser.

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE INTERVIEW.

MRS. LYSLE was dressing for a drive with Harry Napier, when Mrs. Preston brought the package up.

A cream-colored envelope, highly scented, and stamped with a foreign crest, and an exquisite little jewel-case.

Cassandra seized upon the letter with a scream of delight.

"It is from De Boganville," she cried. "I know his seal, and what on earth has he sent me?"

She fairly tore open the case in her eagerness, and there on a bed of blue silk was the loveliest set of rubies that eyes ever beheld.

"Dear me, how beautiful," exclaimed Mrs. Preston; "do read the letter, Cassie, and see what he says; it must be a proposal, of course."

"To be sure; I've been looking to hear from him this week or two, he as good as told me what his intentions were at Mrs. Murtagh's reception, and wherever I go, he's eternally at my elbow; the horrid creature; his rubies are exquisite, and I shall break my heart over giving them up, but I wouldn't marry De Boganville if he were Emperor of France."

"Bless my soul, why not?" cried mamma, putting aside her French novel; "I fancied you liked him excessively."

Cassie laughed nervously as he broke the crested seal.

"Liked him? Why, it gives me a chill of horror every time I set eyes on him. I believe in my soul the man is possessed of some evil power; his eyes are curious, and when he looks at me! Ugh! I can't bear to think of it. That night at the reception he managed to get me into the greenhouse, and it was all I could do to keep from shrieking aloud! If I were his wife, I should expect him to murder me as Blue-Beard did his wives."

"Pshaw, what a simpleton you are, Cassie," said the millionaire's wife in disgust. "You take up all sorts of crack-brained fancies. Count De Boganville is an uncommonly agreeable man, and his preference does you honor—read the letter."

The pretty young widow's white hand shook nervously as she unfolded the scented sheet.

"MY DEAR MRS. LYSLE," she read, "there is no need for me to repeat what you already know. I am your captive, your willing slave, won by the witchery of your wonderful beauty. I want you for my wife. If you require any references touching my character or circumstances, you shall have them."

"But I cannot bear to see you smiling upon my rivals, and feel in doubt about my ultimate success in winning you. Think the matter over, and if you can favor my suit, wear the accompanying jewels at the soiree to-night. I shall look in all confidence to see you wear them, and, my dear madam, I advise you not to disappoint me."

"Yours, devotedly,

"FERDINAND DE BOGANVILLE."

Cassie opened her black eyes wide.

"He advises me not to disappoint him! Well, now, I call that impudence, to say the least."

"He's French, my dear, and Frenchmen are always peculiar," said mamma.

"Then I don't like Frenchmen, and Count De Boganville will have to bear his disappointment. I shall send his jewels back, but don't I hate it! What beauties they are! Only see, mamma."

Mrs. Dunbar looked on, with all a woman's love for such trifles in her eyes, while Cassie laid the glowing stones against the purplish bands of her black hair.

"They certainly are very fine, and they would quite match your wine-colored silk; Lauderdale hasn't spoken yet. Suppose you wear the jewels to-night, and become Lady De Boganville."

Her tone was only half bantering for a woman of the world that she was, and the Frenchman's flatterer manners and high-sounding title, had quite captivated her.

The widow shrugged her white shoulders, as she dropped the jewels into the casket.

"Lady De Boganville sounds very fine, and I'd like to wear the rubies, but Lauderdale will speak, and Lauderdale must be my husband. It is bad enough to be forced to take him, with his grizzly beard and squint eye, but one consolation, I shan't feel afraid of him, and he's so delightfully rich. Only think what it will be to have five thousand per annum for pin money, and half a dozen wholesale houses packed with silks and velvets at one's command. Ah, Flavia! you've queened it over me for some time: when I am Lauderdale's wife, my turn will come."

"When you *are* his wife, yes; but I very much doubt that you ever will be; you have a chance to marry this French adventurer, and have him turn out a cook or a coachman on your hands, but Lauderdale's another man. Don't count your chickens before they are hatched, Cassie."

"If it were my misfortune to be as plain as you are, my poor Flavia, I should not dare to do such a thing; but being, according to your husband's judgment, the handsomest woman in the State, I may safely count on every egg."

Mrs. Preston's answer to this provoking speech was a stinging slap, which made her sister's cheek redden and tingle, and filled her black eyes with a dangerous fire.

"How dare you?" she cried, raising the hairbrush she held, with a menacing gesture.

"How dare you insult me with your impudent speeches, under my own roof, too, and beholden to me for the very bread you eat?" retorted Mrs. Preston.

Mamma rose from her sofa in the bay window and put aside her toy terrier, causing that pampered animal to shake her silver bells, and to bark fiercely.

"My dears, my dears, I'm astonished," she cried, coming between the enraged sisters; "I didn't think you capable of such ill-bred conduct. Cassie, put away the rubies if you have decided to send them back, and hold your tongue."

Whether mamma's interposing form would have succeeded in keeping the amiable sisters apart is a matter of doubt, but a knock at the boudoir door restored smiling serenity in an instant.

"If you please, Miss Cassie," said Kitty, looking in, "Mr. Napier is at the door in his carriage."

Miss Cassie screamed with delight, after her childish fashion, and flew to the window.

"Ah, the darling fellow, how handsome he is," she cried, peeping through the lace curtains; "if one could only have him for a husband; and he perfectly adores me too; but his income barely foots his tailor's bills, and that puts an end to it; but I musn't keep him waiting."

She flew at her hat and mantle, and was all equipped and half across the hall in a trice.

"What business have you riding with him at all when you've no notion of accepting him?" said Mrs. Preston.

"We all do foolish and unbecoming things, my dear," she replied, looking back over her shoulder; "for instance, you *will* wear rose-pink and point-lace to-night, when Quaker-drab would suit your face far better. By-bye, my gentle Flavia, by-bye, mamma—please pack up those lovely rubies, I can't bear to do it myself, and send them back to the count; you may write a line if you will, sorry I can't accept, and all that sort of thing."

"Then you are quite decided, Cassie?"

"Quite decided, mamma! Lauderdale will speak to-night, and I shall accept him. I never could marry the count, though I'd dearly love to be a titled lady; the very sight of him gives me a nervous chill; I believe he's a vampire; I wish I had never set my eyes on him!"

She fluttered down the stairs, and was seated in her old lover's carriage, and driven away through the May sunshine; and, according to instructions, mamma put up the glowing rubies, and returned them with a polite line of regret to Count De Boganville's address.

Mrs. Lysle had a charming drive, and listened with flushing cheeks and smiling eyes to Mr. Napier's tender avowal; but she had strength enough to resist him.

"I like you ever so well, Harry," she said, while the mettled bays pranced on, and he held her soft fingers in his clasp; "a great deal better than any man I know; all the same, I must refuse you. I am poor myself, and I cannot afford to

marry a poor man; I made the mistake once, and bitterly regretted it. I'm not the sort of woman to be a poor man's wife. I believe in the old saying, 'When poverty comes in at the door, love goes out at the window.'"

So that ended Mr. Napier's second dream.

"Poor fellow," sighed Cassie, putting on her wine-colored silk that evening; "how devoted he was, and so handsome; if only he had Lauderdale's money how nice it would be!"

The drawing-rooms at Clyde Place were filled at an early hour, and as usual, Mrs. Lyle was the centre of attraction.

The young widow, with her black locks and pink cheeks, and eastern eyes, was the rage; every man in town, eligible and ineligible, was in love with her. Her tablets were soon full, and it was growing late, when Mr. Lauderdale succeeded in getting speech with her.

"These rooms are very close, Mrs. Lysle," he said, in his grave, stately way; suppose we take a turn on the terrace?"

Cassie consented, a smile of triumph dawning in her eyes.

She slid her little white hand within his arm, and they made their way out of the ball-room.

Under the stars, Mr. Lauderdale cleared his throat several times before he found courage to speak.

His first marriage had been based on mercenary interests, but this beautiful woman at his side he loved.

"Mrs. Lysle," he began at last, "I don't much like to subject myself to the humiliation of being a second time refused, and yet I cannot rest satisfied until I speak. I loved you before you married Romney Lysle, I love you yet. I cannot expect you to feel for me what you felt for your young husband."

"Hush, hush; why do you speak of him?" gasped Cassie, her cheeks growing white.

"I beg your pardon," continued her companion; "I did not intend to give you pain; indeed, my child, it is the wish of my heart to shield you from all pain and trouble. I am old enough to be your father, Cassie, but I love you with a fond love, and once more I ask you to be my wife."

There was silence for a minute, only the vines rustled in the sweet spring winds, and the stars shone, and the distant river murmured.

Cassie's cheek grew yet whiter, and her eyes looked beyond the gleaming gas-lights, towards the old river-house that had once been her home.

She was thinking of the young lover she had loved so passionately; of the terrible secret hidden under those dark waters.

"You do not answer me, my dear," urged Mr. Lauderdale; "and I am at a loss how to interpret your silence."

She roused herself with a shudder, and put her hand in his.

"I am willing to be your wife, Mr. Lauderdale."

He clasped the cold hand closely, and carried it to his lips.

"My darling, you shall never have cause to repent your choice. I will make you happy, so happy, that in time you will surely learn to feel something of the love I bear towards you; don't you think so?"

She looked up at him, and her eyes filled; despite her worldiness, his devotion touched her.

"I do think so, Mr. Lauderdale," she replied; "even now, I like you better than any one else; I will be your true and faithful wife."

He bent over her with grave tenderness, and kissed her trembling lips, as he put a showy diamond on her finger.

Returning to the glare and glitter of the drawing-rooms Cassie's momentary emotion all vanished, she felt nothing but unalloyed triumph.

"The deed is done, and my day is at hand," she whispered to her sister, holding up the finger on which the diamond glittered.

Mrs. Preston smiled, but the smile was rather a ghastly one. She liked to badger, and command, and patronize her sister, but the idea of seeing her a wealthier woman than herself was not at all agreeable.

"I wish you joy, I'm sure," she managed to say.

Cassie laughed.

"You wish me no such thing; you are ready

to die of envy. Your face is actually green. Dear me, Flavia, you *should not* wear rose-pink, 'tis so dreadfully unbecoming. I don't remember ever to have seen you looking so plain."

Poor Mrs. Preston found no chance to vent her wrath, but was forced to smother it in silence, for at that minute Count De Boganville appeared, and claimed Mrs. Lysle's hand for the ensuing dance.

The dance over, he drew her out of the crowd, and into the adjoining room.

"Throw this shawl over your head, and come with me," he said, catching up a silken web that trailed over the arm of a sofa.

The widow turned and looked at him, her red lips curving with contempt.

"Is it a custom in France, Count De Boganville," she asked, "for a gentleman to address a lady as he would a dog?"

The count shrugged his shoulders, and a curious gleam lit his sharp, restless eyes.

"We won't discuss the customs of France just now, Mrs. Lysle; come with me; it is delicious in the gardens, and I want to talk to you."

He seized upon the trailing shawl, and threw it about her white shoulders, and drew her hand within his own, and Cassie had no power within her to resist him. The glowing gaze of his eyes seemed charged with strange mesmeric power; she shuddered with vague terror, and obeyed him, as the charmed bird flutters helplessly into the fangs of the serpent.

The music was striking up again; she knew she should be missed from the ball-room; the man she had just accepted for her future husband would wonder at her absence; yet she suffered the French count to lead her out beneath the summer stars.

"You would not wear my rubies," he said, when they had reached the Willow Avenue, turning and facing her.

"No, I could not," she faltered, her heart in a flutter of strange, nervous terror.

"They were beautiful, and very valuable, and I fancied you were fond of jewels?"

She could see the glitter of his eyes in the light of the young moon; and the touch of his fingers on her hand seemed like fire. Her very limbs shook under her; she had no power to command her voice. Who was this man? What was he that his presence terrified her so?

"Let me go in," she gasped out, making an effort to free her hands; "It is damp and my shoes are thin."

But he held her fast, and laughed a low, taunting laugh.

"In such a hurry to leave me? What's the matter, Mrs. Lysle? You are not afraid of me."

"No, but you have no right to keep me here. I shall go in."

"Tell me first why you would not wear my rubies?"

Cassie's temper blazed up and her eyes flashed. "I have told you—because I did not choose to wear them, because I do not love you, and cannot be your wife."

The Frenchman laughed again, a laugh not pleasant to hear.

"Is it necessary, then, that you love the man you marry, Mrs. Lysle? I beg your pardon, but did you love your first husband?"

She gave a sudden start and uttered a suppressed cry, and then she tore herself free from his grasp.

"What is it to you, sir, whether I loved him or not? You have no right to question me?"

"Pardon, madam, but I have. All things are fair in love, and I love you to distraction; I have loved you for months."

The widow laughed scornfully.

"Months, Count De Boganville? Our acquaintance scarcely dates over a month ago."

"Are you sure of what you say, madam? Look at me well."

She looked at him with dilating eyes and quivering nerves. Was he a madman or was she losing her senses? What was it about his handsome, sinister face, and in his fiery eyes that thrilled her with such strange sensations?

"I met you at my sister's reception for the first time, Count De Boganville," she replied, struggling desperately to keep her self-control; "don't make me regret that I ever met you at all; stand out of my way, please."

"Whether you regret it or not, my dear Mrs. Lysle, it is all the same; I love you, I have loved you, as I said, for months, and one of these days I shall make you my wife."

"Count De Boganville!"

"My dear Mrs. Lysle! Dear me, how very handsome you are. I have seen many beautiful women, never one like you. I couldn't bear to lose you."

"You'll have to bear it then; do you see this ring upon my finger? Mr. Lauderdale put it there not an hour ago, and in a month he will be my husband."

"Happy Mr. Lauderdale! In a month? Well, on the whole, I don't object to the arrangement. A month hence you will be his wife; another month may you see his wealthy widow, and then my turn will come."

"What do you mean? Are you a mad man or an idiot? Let me go this instant!"

"No matter what I mean at present, my dear. Marry Mr. Lauderdale as soon as you please; we'll make our arrangements later."

Cassie's self control was quite gone.

She wrenched herself from him, and made an attempt to escape, but his supple fingers clutched her arm ere she had made a second step.

"You shall suffer for this, sir," she panted; "you shall answer for this insult; let me go. I won't hear your nonsense one minute longer. you're a lunatic!"

"You'll hear me quite as long as I see fit to keep you here, Mrs. Lysle," he answered, his voice calm and cool, his mocking eyes on her face, his fingers on her wrists like hot steel; "don't you know that every living thing has its master? I am yours, my beautiful Circe! Your master, do you hear? and you are as sure to do my bidding to the letter, as you are to breathe! There, there; softly now, you must hear me out. I am neither fool nor madman, as you fancy. Who and what I am, you will find out in good time. And, my beautiful Cassandra, you, who bewitch men with your wondrous beauty, and make them mad for your love, shall I tell you what you are? Lend me your ear for one minute."

He drew her close to his side, bent his head, and whispered a single word in her ear.

Every vestige of color died out of her face, she uttered a low, gurgling cry, her eyes stared up at him full of wild horror, and she sunk slowly down, like one dead at his feet.

He looked down at her, lying in a shining disheveled heap on the wet grass, and laughed exultantly.

"What a glorious creature she is; dangerous as a pantheress, and beautiful as an angel. It is something to have such a woman so utterly under one's control. What I command, she will do. Well, let her marry Lauderdale, I shan't interfere; a few months more or less will be the difference; one day she shall be mine; I have sworn it, and I'll keep my oath."

He turned on his heel and left her, lying like one dead, under the gloom of the drooping willows.

CHAPTER V.

MR. FALKLAND.

MRS. LYSLE was in the drawing-room for the first time in several weeks.

Since the night of the ball, at Clyde Place, she had been dangerously ill. Mr. Lauderdale found her that night, lying amid the rank grass of the Willow Avenue, dead, as he at first believed. And the terrible swoon was very much like death; it was hours before she recovered consciousness, and then one fainting fit followed another, until she sank into the stupor of a brain fever.

For days she lay at the very door of death, but in the end her splendid constitution triumphed, and she lived.

Pale and thin, but even more beautiful than ever, she sat at the sunny window, in her becoming dress of black silk, a scarlet flower in her bosom, another amid the bands of her raven hair.

"You look wretched, Cassie," remarked Mrs. Preston, coming in, "I'm really afraid you're not well enough for a drive."

"Yes, I am; a drive will do me good, Flavia, and I fancied I was looking quite well."

"So you are," put in Flavia's husband; don't mind what Flavia says—did you ever know one woman to say that another looked well? I don't think I ever saw you looking better, Mrs. Lysle."

Mrs. Lyslie acknowledged the compliment with a graceful bow and her sweetest smile, while poor, plain Flavia bit her lips in vexation.

"I suppose you will settle with Mr. Lauderdale about your wedding day this morning, my dear?" remarked mamma, taking a sugared almond from her gilded bon-bon box and tossing it to her pet dog, "or would you like me to speak to him about it?"

"Dear me, no, mamma, there's no necessity; I can arrange it. Lauderdale is very impatient; the earlier the day, the better he will be pleased," replied the pretty widow, looking out into the sunshine with wide, solemn eyes.

"So shall I," continued mamma. I don't fancy long engagements at all; if you had not fallen sick at such an inopportune time, everything might have been settled long ago."

"The oddest way to fall sick, too," put in Mrs. Preston; "fainting dead away without any cause; I can't understand it yet. I've an idea that that French count was at the bottom of it, somehow."

"You have such a few ideas, as a rule, Flavia," replied the widow, quietly, "it would be a pity to rob you of this one."

Mr. Preston laughed uproariously, to his wife's extreme provocation.

"You must see to the settlements, Preston," continued mamma, treating the dog to a second sugar plum, and ignoring the merriment altogether, "I want them legally made. Lauderdale promises that Cassie shall have five thousand per annum, in her own right. You must have it down in black and white."

"Ah, to be sure, I'll see to it; five thousand a year's a mere nothing to Lauderdale; he's doubly as well off as I am."

Mrs. Preston coughed nervously and withdrew to the flower-stand that occupied the southern window, followed by a glance of malicious triumph from Cassie's black eyes.

"Speaking of business matters reminds me of your house, Mrs. Lysle," continued Mr. Preston; "I've a chance to sell it now—the old river house I mean, where you used to live."

The fitful pink faded out of Cassie's cheeks.

"You can sell it, you say?" she said, nervously, "I'm glad of that—pray do so without delay."

The millionaire shrugged his shoulders.

"'Tis a nice bit of property, Mrs. Lysle; if it belonged to me, I should think twice before I let it slip through my fingers. That river bottom is one of the finest bits of soil in the State, and the old house itself might be converted into a charming country seat, with very little cost."

The widow threw up two deprecating hands, her eyes wide and startled, her cheeks ashen.

"Don't speak of such a thing," she cried, "I detest the place; I never want to see it again; for mercy's sake let it go."

"Very well," said her brother-in-law, somewhat surprised at her vehement earnestness, "it shall be as you say."

"One would fancy you would like to hold on to it, Cassie, considering how fond you were of poor Romney," said Mrs. Preston, maliciously.

"That's all nonsense," interrupted mamma, closing her bon-bon box, and pushing the pampered dog aside. "I agree with Cassie about selling the place; it is perfectly detestable. What can you get for it, Preston?"

"Five thousand."

"Cash?" questioned the fair old lady eagerly.

"Cash," assented Mr. Preston.

"Then close the bargain at once. Cassie, my dear, how opportune the money will come in. You will need so many little things to complete your wedding outfit, and if I am to go with you abroad, I shall want a new wardrobe complete. I haven't an article that isn't getting shabby."

"Very well, mamma, the money will be at your disposal when Mr. Preston gets it," said the pretty widow, the rich color returning to her cheeks.

"I am to sell it, then," said Mr. Preston, regretfully. "Bless my soul, what fools you women are! You'd sell your souls, if you've got any, for money to buy gew-gaws! I hate to see the property go; it would come in for your son."

by-and-by. Mrs. Lysle, you'd better keep it in your hands. I'll let you have all the money you want."

"No, no, no, I want it to go. I shall never rest satisfied until I am rid of it," cried Cassie, excitedly.

"All right, all right, I'll let Mr. Falkland know at once."

"Mr. Falkland, is that the man who wants to purchase it?" questioned Flavia.

"Yes, he's a new-comer, and rather an odd sort of genius, judging from his looks."

"Has he a family?"

"No, he is a bachelor, going to live all by himself, a sort of scientific hermit, it appears. Well, I'll be off. There's Lauderdale below, Mrs. Lysle! Bless us, what a turn-out he does sport. That pair of grays would bring more money than your farm any day."

Cassie turned toward the window, and her black eyes flashed with exultation at sight of the glittering equipage that awaited her. In a few days she would be the very wealthiest woman in the State, the queen of fashion, the mistress of the handsomest residence in town. Her troubles were pretty well over; her day of triumph was at hand.

Her parlor was all gone, and she looked quite as beautiful as she had ever appeared, even in the fresh bloom of her girlhood, when she ran down stairs, arrayed for a drive.

Mr. Lauderdale met her in the hall, and led her out to the carriage, his grave face all alight with love and pleasure.

"My darling, my beautiful darling," he said, as he seated her amid the luxurious cushions, "I am so glad to see you getting strong and well again. You cannot think what I suffered, dear, during those terrible days when they told me at any hour I might lose you. That is all past, thank heaven; and now, my dearest, you won't make it long until you are all my own?"

"No, Mr. Lauderdale; I will become your wife any time you wish."

He caught her hand, and carried it to his lips, as the carriage-door shut them in, and the mettled horses went off like birds down the sunlit street.

The wedding day was appointed one month hence, and after a long and delightful drive, Mrs. Lysle returned home in the best of spirits.

"Walk into the drawing-room, Mr. Lauderdale," said Mr. Preston, meeting them in the hall; "you'll find the ladies there; I know you don't like it, but I must carry Mrs. Lysle off to the library to attend to a small business matter. Come, Cassie, if your old house by the river must be sold, you must see Mr. Falkland, and make the necessary arrangements."

"Why, is Mr. Falkland here?"

"Yes, he's in the library awaiting your coming. He appears to be dreadfully anxious to get the place. When I told him he could have it, he insisted on accompanying me home and settling the matter at once."

"Very well, I'm glad he did, and I'm much gratified to see the horrid old place sold."

And Mrs. Lysle, with her pretty, coquettish hat surmounting her raven braids, a diamond lustre in her eyes and primrose pink in her cheeks, followed Mr. Preston into the library.

A gentleman rose as they entered; a slight, pale, foreign-looking person, with a heavy blonde beard, and curling, blonde hair.

"Mr. Falkland, this is Mrs. Lysle," said Mr. Preston, bristling in.

The widow nodded, and Mr. Falkland bowed profoundly.

"Mrs. Lysle hasn't changed her mind, after the manner of ladies," continued Mr. Preston; she is still willing to sell the place, so we'll fix up the preliminaries at once."

"Very well, sir," responded Mr. Falkland.

At the sound of his voice, Cassie looked up with a start. His deep, dark, melancholy eyes were fixed upon her face, with a curious expression, which made her heart flutter, and brought a vivid color to her cheeks.

For some reason his presence seemed to agitate her; she could scarcely control her voice, and her hand shook so when she was called upon to sign the necessary documents, that Mr. Preston looked at her in surprise.

"Why, Mrs. Lysle, how nervous you are," he said; "what's the matter?"

"Nothing, only I'm tired, and as soon as you are done with me, I'll go."

"You've nothing else to do but receive your money from Mr. Falkland?"

That gentleman was already engaged counting it out, and Cassie received it from his hands, and left the library in a tremor.

"I can't think what has come over me," she mused, crossing the corridor to her mother's room, "The least thing agitates me so; and I'm always meeting such odd people. There's Count De Boganville, the very sight of him gives me a nervous chill, and this man, this Mr. Falkland, the sound of his voice went right to my heart. He reminded me of *Romney*. Ah, heaven," and she pressed her hands against her throbbing breast, and spoke in passionate whispers, "if I could forget that! But something is continually bringing it back! If I could only forget *Romney*!"

Mamma's door opened, and Lilybell flew out jingling all her silver bells, and barking furiously. In an instant the widow was herself again.

"I bring you good news, mamma," she cried, as she entered. "My wedding day is one little month hence, and here in my hand are five thousand dollars, the price of that dismal old house by the river. Our troubles are all over, at last, mamma."

Mamma tossed her novel across the room, and arose, and took her daughter to her bosom.

"My pretty Cassie," she said, embracing her, "you have not disappointed me! Yes, our troubles are well over at last, thank heaven; from henceforth we will reign and rule in purple and fine linen."

CHAPTER VI.

THE GHOSTLY FACE.

THE wedding day was one short week off. Mrs. Preston's town-house was in a bustle of preparation, and Mrs. Preston herself was busy from morning till night, giving orders, making purchases, and issuing invitations.

Mamma, who was to accompany the bride to Rome, had little time or thought for anything save her own silky white crimps, and her new silks and laces.

The beautiful bride-elect looked on in indolent enjoyment. It had never been one of her habits to do anything for herself that could by any possible means be put off on another, hence she left matters in her sister's hands, and spent her mornings in the nursery with her boy, and her evenings in the midst of her admirers, while her marriage preparations went on.

Poor Flavia was very ill-tempered, and furiously jealous, but she did her duty faithfully; and knowing as she did, that the sceptre of her queenship would soon be transferred to her sister's hand, she very wisely held her tongue, and kept her bitter feeling to herself.

The preparations went on, the *trousseau* came home from abroad, and the wealthy lover poured gifts of the rarest and most costly kind upon the woman he adored; jewels and laces of fabulous price, and rare eastern fabrics, and dainty trifles of every device.

And Cassie, who all her life long had dreamed of and longed for such things, who loved them with a feverish passion, in her delight and gratification, almost grew to love the fond and generous man who was to be her husband.

"I will be his true and faithful wife," she said to herself, overlooking her wondrous treasures; "I will make my future blot out all that dreadful, horrible past."

And the wedding day was but one little week off.

"I think I'll take Rommie out for a drive this lovely afternoon," said Cassie, strolling up-stairs when lunch was over; "the dear little fellow always enjoys a drive so much. Mamma, shall Lilybell go with us?"

"No," answered mamma, sharply, looking up from the laces she was assorting; "Lilybell shan't go, and I'd advise you to stay at home. A pretty complexion you'll have on your wedding day driving about the country under this scorching sun. Can't Kitty take the child out?"

"Oh, to be sure, but I like to take him myself;

and my fortune's made, you see, so what does it matter about my complexion?"

"Your fortune is not secured yet. You remember the old saying, 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the tip,' put in Flavia, who was writing out invitations.

Cassie shrugged her matchless shoulders, and glanced at her perfect figure reflected in the long mirror.

"That trite adage applies only to plain women, my dear," she answered, wickedly; "a woman without beauty never feels sure of either lover or husband. In my case it is quite different—once my slave, my slave forever. It is not at all probable that Lauderdale will throw me over, even if my cheeks are a bit tanned. Order the pony-carriage, Felice, and tell Kitty to get the child ready."

Flavia bit her lips, and went on directing her tinted cards, and the young widow stood at the window watching the sunlight on the distant hill-tops beyond the town. She was in perfect health again, and radiantly beautiful; her tinted cheeks soft as the hue of a seashell, her ripe, rich mouth, her dazzling smile, and her witching eyes were the wonder of the town. Men lost their wits for love of her, and envied grave, stately, wealthy Mr. Lauderdale so fiercely that many of them could have put a bullet through his heart.

Poor Harry Napier had thrown up his commission and gone off to the ends of the earth; and Count De Boganville, finding there was no hope for him, had suddenly disappeared, no one knew whither, to Mrs. Lysle's infinite relief. And there was one poor fellow, only two and twenty, a widow's only son, who had spent his last dollar in costly gifts to lay on this Circe's shrine; and, then finding there was no hope for him, with her mocking, cruel laugh ringing in his ears, and her lovely face haunting him, had gone off and drank himself mad, and then ended by blowing his own brains out.

Of course Mrs. Lysle was not to blame; she could not help being beautiful, and she was too sensible to distress herself in the least over the fate of her unsuccessful lovers.

She watched the shifting sunlight, her white fingers drumming softly on the glass, a smile of self-content parting her red lips.

The past was drifting so far away from her, that black shadow of crime and horror was growing less and less every hour; she had her boy, and she would soon have wealth and power; what was there to hinder her from being a happy woman?

Her secret was buried forever, her sin could never find her out.

"I shall be back in time to dress for dinner," she said, as the pony carriage whirled up the drive, and Kitty appeared with the boy. "Good-by, mamma—don't look so cross, Flavia, it isn't becoming; come Rommie, come my pet, we are going to have a glorious ride."

The child laughed with delight, and leaping from the nurse's arms, clung to his mother's hands. He was a pretty, promising boy, with his dead father's own face; and although his mother often shuddered when she looked at him, or called him by name, she loved him fondly, and one hope of pardon and absolution lay in her faithful devotion to this child of her murdered husband.

They were established in the low carriage, Kitty beside her charge, and the beautiful, young mother in front, with the reins in her white hands, and the ponies dashed off down the maple street, and from thence out amid the green country lanes.

The child laughed and prattled, and Kitty caught the trailing branches of wild honeysuckle and primrose, until the carriage was filled with blossoms; and the young mother laughed and made the ponies go like the wind.

The town was left far behind them, and they went on under the arches of thick woods, and down into the green valley where the river ran.

"Mamma, mamma, drive the ponies down to the big water; Rommie wants to see it," cried the boy.

The mother looked down toward the river with wide, solemn eyes, the rich color dying out of her cheeks. The old horror was coming back upon her, and she could not shake it off.

The ponies flew on; she seemed to have no power to check them, or turn them from the shaded lane that led straight on to the old river house that had

once been her home; a fascination like the spell of a nightmare led her on.

A sort of shuddering longing to see the old place once more possessed her. She let the horses have their way, the carriage whirled round a wooded slope, and the lone, old house perched above the river came into full view. Cassie looked up at it with a gasping breath.

There was the long portico all hung with scarlet trumpet flowers; there were the windows of the room that had been her bridal chamber. Her eyes filled with hot tears. How happy she had been with Romney in the first days of her widowhood. She let the reins fall, and catching the prattling boy to her bosom, kissed him passionately.

"Don't mamma, you chokes Rommie; lemme see the old house, it'll fall wight down in the wiver presently. Oh! oh! look, Kitty, look, mamma, dat's a bug-a-boo in dat window."

Mrs. Lysle looked quickly, and in that window which overhung the river she caught a glimpse of a white face.

"It is nothing, nothing, she said resolutely, seizing upon the reins, and tugging with all her might at the ponies' heads, but they would go straight on, and a fascination which she could not resist, drew her eyes back to the old house; and there, framed in that window like a ghastly picture, looking straight down upon her, she saw the face of Romney Lysle.

The reins fell from her powerless hands again, and a wild, gasping cry of terror and horror broke from her lips.

The horses leaped forward, wild with sudden fright, dragging the carriage after them at a frightful rate.

"Oh, Miss Cassie, stop 'em for heaven's sake!" cried Kitty, holding the child in her arms; "they'll go over into the river if you don't."

But the wretched woman did not move or speak. She lay back upon the cushions white and rigid, and to all appearances lifeless.

Kitty grew wild with terror; for on one side of the lane the river bank was high and shelving, and the least turn of the runaway horses would send the carriage down to sudden and sure destruction.

She rose in her seat, and holding the frightened child with one arm, got hold of the reins, and made an effort to stop the ponies.

But instead, she only hastened the catastrophe she wished to avert. The mad animals plunged and reared, and shied violently towards the right, and with a crash the carriage went over the bank, and was precipitated into the river full twenty feet below.

Mrs. Lysle's senses came back to her in the hush of a darkened chamber.

Her head felt dull and stunned, and she had a curious feeling that she had been dead and was just coming back to life.

She unclosed her eyes and looked about her. A soft light burned on the crimson-covered stand, and in a rocking-chair before the hearth sat a middle-aged woman dressed in deep mourning.

Where was she? Not at home; yet the room had a familiar look.

Her eyes wandered over the old-fashioned cornices, and the low, white-curtained bed, and she listened to the low, ceaseless flow of the river.

For a minute, in a dreamy, half-unconscious sort of a way, she fancied that the past had come back, that she was a young bride again in Romney's Lysle's home, and her heart began to bound and thrill with joy. But with her next breath a great terror fell upon her.

"Great heaven, where am I?" she gasped out.

The woman sitting before the hearth arose and approached the bed. Cassie, now fully conscious, struggled up to a sitting posture, and grasped her by the arm.

"Who are you?" she demanded fiercely, "and where am I?"

The woman made an effort to put her back upon her pillows.

"You must not excite yourself, my dear," she said; "lie down again, I beg. I had no idea you could move; please lie down for a minute, and I'll call your friends."

But Mrs. Lysle threw off her grasp with the strength of a maniac.

"Hush, hush, tell me where I am; tell me quick!" she panted.

"You are at Mr. Falkland's house, my dear, and your friends are all here!"

"At Mr. Falkland's house? the old river house? Oh, merciful heaven, I thought so; listen to that horrible river? Why was I brought here? Stand out of my way, I won't stay here one minute longer—this place is accursed. Oh, heaven, I shall see that awful face again—let me go."

With a wild bound she leaped out of bed, and pushing her attendant aside, made for the door. It was unlocked, and she tore it open, and went reeling and stumbling down the passage, her long black hair trailing over her white garments, her face fairly livid with terror.

"She is out of her senses, poor soul," cried the woman, following her, and calling loudly for help. A door opened, and Mr. Falkland appeared, just in time to stop the frantic woman, as she was rushing headlong down the stairs.

His face was as white as death, and his limbs shook under him, but he caught her in his arms, and held her firmly.

"Come back to your room, Mrs. Lysle, and I'll call your sister," he said, "she is here, and you are not well enough to excite yourself."

But she struggled in his arms, and her wild shrieks fairly rent the air.

"Let me go, let me get out of this horrible house; why, in heaven's name, was I brought here?"

"It happened by an accident; you have been ill; try and calm yourself, Mrs. Lysle, and you shall know everything."

Somehow his voice soothed her; she ceased to struggle in his grasp, and finally suffered him to lead her back to her chamber.

As she reached it, Mrs. Preston came running up the stairs, followed by Felice.

"In heaven's name, what has happened now?" she demanded.

"Nothing at all," answered Mr. Falkland, cheerfully, "only your sister is conscious at last, as you perceive madam; she was a little excited finding herself in a strange place, but she'll be all right now that you are with her."

"Flavia, Flavia, for mercy's sake take me home," implored Cassie, rushing to her sister's side, and catching both hands; "don't let's stay in this house."

"Heaven knows I don't want to stay here," replied Flavia petulantly; "I never could endure the horrible old place; I believe in my soul it is haunted, for when I tried to get a wink of sleep, after all my fright and fatigue, that dismal old room below was filled with such unaccountable sounds, it fairly made my hair stand on end; and then—"

"Oh, I wouldn't talk in that strain, Mrs. Preston," put in Mr. Falkland, who still lingered; "don't you perceive that your sister is excited? Try and soothe her, and get her to sleep."

Cassie did not utter a word; she sat on the side of the bed, her long hair streaming over her white garments, her great black eyes full of strange, brooding terror.

Mrs. Preston made a gesture of angry impatience, as she beckoned Felice to her side.

"Mix that composing draught, and get Mrs. Lysle to take it," she commanded, sinking into an arm-chair, "and I do hope, Cassie," she went on, "you'll be obliging enough to go to sleep and keep quiet for the rest of the night."

"Is it night?" questioned Cassie.

"Why, to be sure it is; don't stare at me in that way, you make my blood run cold; upon my soul, Cassie, you look like a maniac. There, Felice, that will do. Now, drink it at once, Cassie, and then lie down."

"I don't want to lie down; my head feels better when I'm sitting up," said Mrs. Lysle, as she swallowed the potion. What's the matter with me, Flavia? Have I been ill?"

"No; but you came within a hair's breath of breaking your neck. You would go out driving, you know, though mamma and I both protested against it, and you drove into the river—that's all."

Cassie's eyes widened, and the pallor of her face grew even more ghastly.

"Did the pony carriage go over? I remember now, we were on the brink, and—and—"

She uttered a sort of gasping sob, and covered her eyes with her hands.

Mr. Falkland, who stood with his hand on the doorknob, hurried to her side.

"My dear Mrs. Lysle," he said, "you must not excite yourself in this way. Do lie down, and let Mrs. Preston go to sleep too, and my housekeeper shall return and sit by you."

"No! no!" said Flavia, "I shall remain now that I'm here. I know Cassie better than you do, Mr. Falkland; she can't let any one about her enjoy a moment's comfort; if I tried to sleep, by the time I got my eyes fairly closed, she'd shriek out as she did a minute ago, and have me up again."

"You should be rejoiced to see her conscious, I think," returned the gentleman, gravely; "excitement even, is far less dangerous than the unconscious lethargy of an hour ago."

Oh, to be sure," replied the millionaire's wife, establishing herself comfortably, with her feet in another chair. "I'm glad to see her conscious;—an hour ago I was almost sure she'd never speak again;—no one but herself would have been to blame; she's accountable for everything that has happened."

"What has happened? Why don't you tell me?" said Cassie, in a husky whisper.

"Haven't I told you? You went over the river bank, and came within an inch of breaking your neck, and poor Kitty—"

Mrs. Preston stopped abruptly, warned by a glance from Mr. Falkland.

"Kitty, where is Kitty? And, oh, where is my child? Where is little Romney?"

Mrs. Lysle's voice rose to a shrill shriek, and she bounded to her feet again, but Mr. Falkland's ready hands caught and held her.

"Your child is safe, Mrs. Lysle," he said, "I left him sleeping quietly in my room; hush, or you may disturb him."

"Let me go to him, let me see my darling."

"Not to-night—he fell into the river, you see, when your carriage went over, and it will be better not to disturb him; you can wait till to-morrow."

"Yes, I can wait. Kitty is with him, I suppose?"

"No, but he is in good hands."

"Where is Kitty? I'd like to have her come and bathe my head."

"Felice can do it," said Mrs. Preston, opening her eyes and speaking in a snappish tone, "and do let it be done at once—I was in hopes you'd be quiet after that draught, but nothing will quiet your tongue."

"I won't have Felice! I want Kitty."

"Then you can't get Kitty, for she's dead. She was killed when you drove over the bank yesterday."

Cassie uttered a sharp cry, and a shudder of nervous terror shook her from head to foot.

"Oh, Mrs. Preston, how could you, after all my warnings?" said Mr. Falkland.

"Oh, pshaw," replied Flavia, resuming her comfortable posture again, "she's got to know it, and one time is as well as another. Kitty's dead," she went on, "the horses fell on her, poor creature, and crushed her horribly, and your child would have been swept down the current, but for Mr. Falkland there; he risked his life to save him; and then got you out more dead than alive. Now you know the whole thing, and you may thank your own headstrong folly for what has happened. If you had been killed yourself, as we believed you were at first, I should not have pitied you, nor would mamma. Why can't you do as you're told? A pretty figure you are, and your wedding day only a week off. I told you how it would be; I say again, 'there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.'"

"And I say, what I said before, that trite adage only applies to women like yourself, Mrs. Preston," retorted Cassie, her black eyes beginning to flash; "I can afford to postpone my wedding day, and yet have no fear of losing my bridegroom; he'll be glad enough to get me even at the eleventh hour. Thank heaven, I shall never hold husband or lover, as you do, by the mere force of a bond of honor."

"Hold your tongue!" cried Mrs. Preston, flouncing out of the arm-chair, and out of the room, "I won't stay here and be insulted; you may take care of yourself. Preston didn't want me to come, and I was a fool for my pains; if

you shriek yourself hoarse, "you'll not rouse me again to-night."

And the lady went sweeping down the stairway, with the air of an insulted queen.

"You may follow your mistress, Felice," said Mr. Falkland, as he rang the bell. Mrs. Chudleigh will sit with Mrs. Lysle; and now, I beg of you," he continued, as the girl withdrew, turning to Cassie, "lie down and keep quiet. You were in a very critical condition an hour or two ago, and all this worry and excitement will tell on you to-morrow."

"Let me see my child, and I will."

"Come, then, you must only look in at him; he must not be disturbed; I am a sort of Jack-at-all-trades, Mrs. Lysle, and I do something in the way of *materia medica* now and then, so you may rely upon what I say."

He took her arm and led her from the room and across the hall, to an apartment that used to be Romney Lysle's dressing-room.

"The house seems familiar to you," he remarked; "you lived here once, I believe?"

"Yes, I lived here once," she answered, in a choking voice.

He opened the door softly, and looking in, she saw her boy lying fast asleep, his curly head pillowed on his arm.

"My darling—my pretty darling—what if I had lost him?"

"You would have borne the loss, and have forgotten it in time, as you did his father's loss; there is nothing enduring on earth, Mrs. Lysle."

She shivered from head to foot, as she leaned upon his arm.

"Come away," he said, closing the door, "the child must sleep, and so must you, or you will be seriously ill to-morrow."

They found the housekeeper already established in the chamber, and Mr. Falkland took his leave, repeating his injunction for Mrs. Lysle to sleep; but, despite the composing draught, through all the remaining hours of the night the wretched woman lay with wide, staring eyes, and excited nerves, listening to the ceaseless flow of the river, and thinking, thinking of that one terrible thing which never, through all time or eternity, she would be able to forget.

As the dawn began to redden, she arose and threw the casement wide open. The sky was all bright with tender tints, the birds were chirping amid the rustling trees, and the folded lambs were bleating.

On just such a morning she had looked out once before, her soul sick with the horror of her awful crime.

The horror was with her still. She had no eyes for the tender loveliness of the dawning day. She could not hear the twitter of the birds or the bleating of the lambs, only the dreary flow of the river sounded in her ears; and above the gloomy waves, dark beneath the overhanging foliage of fur and hemlock, she looked every moment to see that ghastly, accusing face appear.

Her crime was securely hidden, as she believed, from all human knowledge; nevertheless, it clung to her like a haunting curse, turning the best joys of her life to bitter ashes on her lips. The wages of sin is death.

CHAPTER VII.

A GHOSTLY VOICE.

THE wedding was postponed for a fortnight, to Mr. Lauderdale's extreme dissatisfaction, and Mrs. Dunbar's great provocation.

"It is too provoking, upon my soul," said the old lady excitedly, pushing Lilybell from her lap, in her indignation, when she heard the news; "the wedding put off. Ten to one it ever comes off at all now; Lauderdale may change his mind, or something else happen, and even if it is otherwise, our clothing will all be old-fashioned and out of style, and we shall reach Rome too late for the carnival. I've no patience with Cassie; I shouldn't have cared if she had broken her neck and been done with it."

Mrs. Preston laughed as she stirred her chocolate, with evident enjoyment.

"What did I tell you, mamma?" she said, triumphantly; "didn't I predict how it would all

turn out? Didn't I say that Cassie would run away with the coachman, or do some equally disgraceful thing? If she don't bring us to shame and sorrow in the end, it will astonish me."

"And disappoint you too, one would infer, my dear," laughed Mr. Preston, rising from the table; "gracious heavens, what creatures you dainty women are! What venomous claws you sheath under your pretty velvet fur! Nothing pleases you so intensely as another woman's downfall, even when that woman is your own sister. I can't see, Flavia, why you need be so hard on Mrs. Lysle."

"And I can't see why you need be so soft on her," retorted his better-half, furiously; "you're always taking her part, and squandering your money on her, and I won't put up with it."

"Won't you, my love? All right, your will is law, of course; only I'd be obliged to you to take those green ribbons off, they're horribly unbecoming; what a pity it is you haven't a little of Mrs. Lysle's exquisite taste;" and Mr. Preston took up his hat, and sauntered out of the room, whistling:

"You promised to bring me a bunch of blue ribbons, To tie up her bonny brown hair."

Poor Flavia, pushing away her cup with such violence that she overturned it, jumped up from the table, and throwing herself on a sofa, burst into hysterical sobbing.

"I won't put up with it, I won't," she cried, "to be insulted in this way, and on her account. Let her come back to my house, and I'll turn her out of doors."

Mamma laughed derisively, as she tossed a tid-bit of pheasant's breast to Lilybell.

"You'll do no such thing, Flavia; don't be a fool! Cassie is aggravating, I'll admit, and one would fancy her unsound of mind from the way she acts. I can't understand this last escapade of hers at all. Why she chose to drive down that dismal river road, and over the bank, passes my comprehension. Why she persists in nursing that child, and will postpone her wedding day, is stranger still; nevertheless, we must put up with her whims. She may be Mrs. Lauderdale next week, and, you see, my dear, she isn't to blame for your lack of beauty. You inherit it from your father—he was the ugliest man I ever saw, and Preston is right about those green ribbons, they are horribly unbecoming. Ring the bell, if you please, and order the carriage round; I'll drive over and see how that miserable child is. What a relief it would have been, if they had let him alone when he was in the river. I detest going to that old house, but as I have an engagement with my dressmaker, I'll take it in my way, and see if I can't induce Cassie to come home; it is all nonsense about the danger of moving the child."

But Cassie could not be persuaded to leave her child, and the doctors declared unanimously that he must not be moved. A slow fever had set in on the day following the accident, and the little fellow lay in a very dangerous condition.

"He must not be moved, Mrs. Lysle," said Mr. Falkland, "but you can return home yourself, and safely trust him in my hands; all that can be done for him, I'll do."

But despite her horror at the thought of remaining in the old house that had once been her home, Cassie determined to stay. She could not desert her child; cruel, and wordly, and wicked, yet she was not wholly devoid of human feeling.

Mr. Lauderdale drove over in his handsome carriage, and insisted upon removing the boy; but the doctors declared the child could never survive it, and the idea was abandoned, and the wedding-day postponed.

"If I only had poor Kitty," thought Cassie, sitting in the darkened chamber, and watching the little tossing figure as the slow hours went by.

But even then poor Kitty's funeral procession was winding down the village road towards the cemetery.

Felice was with her, and Mr. Lauderdale and his housekeeper were ready and willing with their help, but Mrs. Lysle found the old house unutterably dreary, and suffered untold tortures of horror and remorse.

She lived over that dreadful night a thousand times; and sometimes, while every nerve in her body was thrilling with terror, impelled by a fascination, a curious something, stronger than her

own will, she would creep down the stairs and open the parlor door, and look in at the sofa standing in its old place, her eyes dilated, her face ashen white. She dreaded to see that awful face again as she feared to die, and yet she was continually on the lookout for it.

Mr. Falkland regarded her strange, restless movements with grave, pitying eyes.

"I don't think she's entirely right in her mind, poor woman," he said, in explanation, to his housekeeper; "she lived in this house once, and lost her husband by a violent death, which accounts for it."

One night, the self-same night it was that would have seen Cassie Mr. Lauderdale's bride, but for the inopportune accident, the child's symptoms seemed a little more favorable, and, yielding to Mr. Falkland's entreaties she left Mrs. Chudleigh and Felice to watch by him, and retired to her own room. But, worn out as she was, it was impossible to sleep. In the chamber that had been her bridal room, in the home of the husband her own hand had murdered, she could find no repose. She lay down on the bed, but in a very few minutes she was on her feet again. She opened the casement and looked out; the silent stars seemed to mock her, the voices of the night filled her with shuddering terror. She brooded over her secret till her brain seemed on fire, and the old morbid desire to look upon the scene of her unnatural crime grew upon her. She arose, trembling in every limb, and making her way to the closet where she had hidden away the overcoat which was beneath her husband's head that last night, she opened the door. A cloud of must and dust almost stifled her, but she groped in, and felt about her. The coat was there. She drew it forth, her face livid, her eyes glaring, her soul in a frenzy of curious, morbid fear.

It was all damp with mold, and on the breast were two stiff, black stains. A gasp of horror escaped her ghastly lips, but with her shaking hands she dived into the pockets.

There might be something, some trace or clew, which she had failed to find in her hurry and excitement that morning, when she drew forth the blank-book and the money. There it was; she found a yellow handkerchief marked with her husband's name, and a letter.

She looked at it, and saw that the envelope bore her own name.

With a suppressed cry, she put the coat back, closed the door, and returned to her bed-room.

The letter was open, the dampness had loosened the seal. She drew out the stained sheet, and read:

"MY DEAREST WIFE:—I love you as my own life, and better, though you may not think so. I would die to make you happy, Cassie; but I should never have married you. You are too beautiful to be poor; but no one in this world will love you as fondly as I have."

"Cassie, you shall have your jewels and your new dress; I won't disappoint you. I have given you the strongest proof of my love; for your sake, I have become a common thief."

"Here is the money, I will put it on your table where you will be sure to find it. Get the trifles you desire, go to your sister's ball, and be happy. If I am gone to-morrow, say that business called me away; if I never return, forgive me, darling, and sometimes remember me. For your sake, I have done that which makes my life worthless. If we never meet again, God bless you."

"Your poor, weak, but loving

"ROMNEY."

Her tears were falling like rain, when she finished this letter.

"My poor Romney," she sobbed, "how he loved me, and to think that I should murder him."

A low, rustling sound at the door startled her; she dashed the tears from her eyes, and crushed the letter into her bosom. There was a slow, hesitating tap, and then a voice called her name:

"Cassie! Cassie! Cassie!"

She stood and listened with shaking limbs, and dilating eyes.

The tap was repeated, three times the voice called:

"Cassie! Cassie!! Cassie!!!"

"It is Romney's voice," she said, in a hoarse whisper; "he is calling me, I must go!"

And with a face that would never look more

ghastly in the grave, she went crouching across the room, until she reached the door.

Once more the solemn voice called.

"I am coming, Romney," she replied.

Her shaking hand turned the knob, and the door swung open. She looked out with wild, straining eyes. The lamp burned dimly in the wide corridor, but there was not a soul to be seen. She stared about her, whispering in shuddering accents:

"Who called me? Romney, are you here?"

No answer, save the complaining voice of the river. She stood motionless, in an attitude of indescribable horror, her face ashen white, her wide, startled eyes staring straight before her. The door of the opposite room opened softly, and Mr. Falkland came out.

"Good heavens, Mrs. Lysle, what's the matter? What has happened?" he exclaimed, as his eyes fell upon her, "are you ill?"

She did not move or speak, or even appear to be aware of his presence.

"Are you walking in your sleep?" he continued, seizing her arm, and giving her a little shake. "Mrs. Lysle, what is the matter?"

She looked up at him with wild, terror-filled eyes.

"Some one called me," she said, her voice hoarse and unnatural. "Romney called me."

"Come back to your room; you have been dreaming. I don't understand you."

She suffered him to lead her back to the chamber, but she shook her head.

"No, I was wide awake; some one called me three times! Is there any one in this house except yourself and Mrs. Chudleigh?"

"Not a soul, and we haven't left your child's bedside in the last hour."

"Then Romney called me."

"Who is Romney? What do you mean?"

"He was my husband—my husband *who is dead*."

Her voice failed her, and her lips quivered. Mr. Falkland smiled, but her eyes were full of a curious blending of scorn and pity.

"Dear me, Mrs. Lysle, you surely don't believe in ghosts," he said, "you don't pretend to make me believe that the house I bought of you is haunted, do you?"

"Don't ask me questions; don't talk to me," she cried passionately, covering her face with her hands. "I am the most wretched woman on the wide earth; I wish I were dead."

"No you don't, Mrs. Lysle; you are very fond of life, you wouldn't care to die to-night, if the chance were offered you."

She looked up at him in startled surprise. He was looking at her with calm, smiling eyes, pitiful, and yet scornful.

"What do you mean? No, I wouldn't care to die to-night; I can't bare to think of dying."

"So I supposed. You are only nervous, Mrs. Lysle; you'll get over all this when you leave my dismal, old house, and return to your gay world, and marry Mr. Lauderdale. No one called you, the dead never come back; you have been thinking of your husband so much that you fancied you heard his voice, that's all."

"No, no, I did hear it; he called me, and Mr. Falkland, I have seen him, seen him twice."

"Seen your dead husband, Mrs. Lysle? you'll make me think you are out of your mind, if you go on this way. I wonder if you have any fever?"

He took her hand, but it was icy cold.

"No, I have no fever, and I'm not out of my mind, Mr. Falkland," she said clinging to his arm, and looking up at him with lovely, entreating eyes, "and I'm telling you the truth; I've seen my husband twice, and I heard his voice to-night. Oh, it is dreadful, horrible!"

The gentleman laughed lightly.

"I should fancy it would be pleasant to have one's dead friends return, if such a thing were possible; the great trouble is, they leave us, and come back no more. Did you love your husband, Mrs. Lysle?"

"Yes, I loved him."

He looked at her with strange earnestness, his firm lips working nervously.

"You loved him," he said, "and yet you wouldn't care to have him back again, would you?"

She looked up sharply.

"What do you mean? What right have you to ask such strange questions?"

"No right, but I had a fancy to know. You beautiful women are such a puzzling study, Mrs. Lysle. You think of your first husband, until you imagine you see him; and yet, if by some wondrous power he could be restored to you alive, I mean, his old self, would you be willing to relinquish all your brilliant future, and live with him again, a poor man's wife, in his old house?"

She shuddered, and the rich color leaped back to her white cheeks.

"No," she answered, frankly; "I should not; we never care to repeat our past lives; I loved my husband, but I wasn't happy here; I could never be happy as a poor man's wife."

"Precisely what I thought," replied her companion, a hard, cold expression driving every trace of pity from his face; you are a true woman and a candid one; it is a pity you are so imaginative. Let me give you a sleeping potion, and I'll return to your child."

"No, no, no," and she caught his arm and clung to it; "I can't sleep, let me go with you. I shall die with terror if I am alone again in this house."

"Come then, if you will," he answered, coldly, and she followed him into the room where the sick child lay.

And together they kept watch until the day broke. Morning found the little boy much better, and two days later he was strong enough to be removed to Mr. Preston's house.

"I dislike to give my little patient up, Mrs. Lysle," said Mr. Falkland, who escorted the widow and her son home; "I am fond of children, and I have got to have quite a tender feeling for little Romney. You don't think of taking him with you on your bridal tour, do you?"

Cassie laughed and shrugged her graceful shoulders. Out of the old river house, in her sister's wealthy home again, she was her own gay, volatile self.

"It wouldn't be quite the thing to take such a baby on one's bridal trip, would it?" she said; "I'm afraid Mr. Lauderdale might not like it, and I'm sure that mamma would raise a furious storm; she goes with us, you know, and she abominates children; but I dreadfully dislike leaving the dear little fellow with Flavia, she's so cross and cold-hearted."

"Leave him with me, Mrs. Lysle," said the gentleman, eagerly. "I give you my word I'll take care of him, and Mrs. Chudleigh is a famous nurse."

Cassie looked thoughtful.

"The idea isn't bad," she replied, "I shouldn't feel afraid to trust you, Mr. Falkland; you have done me great service, which I can never fully repay, and somehow," she added, giving him one of her sweet smiles, "I feel as if you were an old friend; I've felt so from the first time I met you."

Mr. Falkland bowed, and expressed himself as being highly complimented.

"And Romney likes you ever so much," continued the beautiful young mother. "I should like it amazingly, only I can't bear to leave my baby in that horrid old house."

The gentleman laughed.

"How you do dislike your old home, Mrs. Lysle," he said, "and I think it one of the most charming places in the country. It is high, and cool, and picturesque, and the old-fashioned rooms are just the thing for a child; I really wish you would make up your mind to leave the boy with me; it would be an act of Christian charity, Mrs. Lysle; I shall be dreadfully lonely when you are married and gone."

She looked up at him curiously.

"Are you a single man, Mr. Falkland?" she asked.

"Wife or child have I none," he made answer laying his hand on his heart, and speaking with stage-like affectation.

The pretty widow laughed, and wondered inwardly that it was so, for despite his palor and gravity, Mr. Falkland was a peculiarly attractive man. His deep, dark, melancholy eyes, had a fascination which even Mrs. Lysle herself could not wholly resist.

"Well, I'll think about it," she said, "and you shall come and dine with us to-morrow, and hear my decision; and, when I return from my wedding tour, we expect to be very gay at Lau-

derdale Place, Mr. Falkland, and I shall insist upon seeing a great deal of you."

Mr. Falkland assured her that her behests would ever be his pleasure, and took his leave, and Cassie was both pleased and flattered to see what power she could wield, even over this man who had hitherto led the life of a recluse, and refused every friendly advance extended towards him.

"I'll let him have the child," she decided impulsively; "he'll be kinder to him than ever Flavia would be, and by-and-by he shall come to Lauderdale Place as a tutor, and I'll pay him handsomely; 'twill be a nice way of rewarding him for all he's done for me."

So Mr. Falkland, coming to dine on the day following, received his answer, and expressed himself much delighted; and a few days later, when the wedding morning dawned, he found himself an honored guest at the wedding breakfast, and even went so far as to accompany the bridal party to the depot, from which they were whirled away on their flight to foreign lands.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SCARLET CAMELIAS.

A YEAR had gone by, and the married pair were still abroad. Mrs. Dunbar had rooms in Paris at the Hotel de Ville, a French maid and *carte-blanche* to purchase any and all the finery she desired, and consequently was in the third heaven of rapturous contentment.

She was the handsomest and grandest old lady that drove along the Boulevards, her open carriage lined with royal purple, her creamy ponies all a-glitter with golden trappings, her own fair person arrayed in softest silks and laces, diamonds on her white, old hands, diamond dust upon the puffs of her white hair.

"What shall you do to-night, Cassie?" she asked, putting aside her novel, and turning towards her daughter, who sat at the window, watching the gay pageantry below.

Mrs. Lauderdale yawned wearily.

"I don't know; there's so much to do and see that one gets surfeited, and cares for nothing; I believe I'm getting home sick," she said.

"Oh hush," cried mamma, "I could live here forever. Paris is the paradise of earth. Don't be unthankful for your good fortune, Mrs. Lauderdale; you are the luckiest woman alive."

The bride bit her scarlet lip, and her dusky eyes were dark with brooding discontent.

"We pay for all we get," she answered, with a hard sort of laugh; "if one could have all this wealth and beauty, and be *free*, life would be worth living; but to be tethered to that old ogre! Bah! 'tis Beauty and the Beast over again, and there's his step on the stairs now. I'm going, I'm getting to loathe the very sight of him."

"My dear, my dear, how foolishly you talk," cried mamma; "Mr. Lauderdale is a pleasant, dignified gentleman, I'm sure, and you've every freedom you desire. I say again, don't be unthankful. Would you like to be Cassie Lysle again, in that dismal old house by the river?"

"Oh heaven, no! Never that, I wouldn't be poor again for the sake of any man that ever lived, but husbands are such a bore; one gets so tired of them."

"That's quite true," said the old lady, serenely; "but any sensible woman can school herself to endure a necessary bore, my dear, to repeat you're rather vulgar way of expressing it. Your poor father, as you've heard me say, was a dreadfully unattractive man, but we got on ever so nicely together, and I always had my way from first to last."

"As I shall have, said Cassie, and humming an opera air, she went waltzing out of one door just as Mr. Lauderdale entered by way of another.

She went to her private dressing-room, and began to overturn the costly trifles on her table. There was quite a variety; gilded bon-bon boxes, and jeweled perfume flasks, and scented *billet-doux*, for in her one year of foreign life, Mr. Lauderdale's young wife had made many friends, and elicited a great deal of admiration. Her rich, ripe, voluptuous beauty was the wonder of the French capital. Artists painted her, women en-

vied her, and men of all types, and in all stations, fell in love with her.

"This is from Lord Holbrook," she said, breaking a crested seal, "an invitation for the ambassador's dinner. Bah! Those state dinners are horribly stupid, and so is his lordship; I shan't go."

"And Colonel Beresford wants me to go to the opera, and Dalton wants me to drive; and poor, love-lorn Jack Hazleton sends that lovely bouquet-holder! What a pack of 'em there is; how can one decide between so many; and Lauderdale will look ready to eat me if I go with any one. He wants me to hang on *his* arm, like a dutiful wife, here in Paris, too!"

She swept the notes aside; but one, in a plain envelope caught her eye, and she uttered a cry of delight.

"Harry Napier, as I live; poor, dear Harry," she said, tearing it open, "and he wants me to drive at six. I'll go; I always was fond of Harry; I'd have married him if only he had old Lauderdale's money."

She crumpled the note, tossed it aside, and arose and rung the bell. Her French maid answered it, with an immense bunch of scarlet camellias in her hand.

"Oh, Jeanette! how beautiful; where on earth did they come from?" cried Cassie, seizing upon the royal, red flowers.

"A page brought them, madam, just as I was coming up."

"No name, no message, Jeanette?"

"None, madame."

Mrs. Lauderdale turned the bouquet round and round, her eyes all alight with eager curiosity.

"I can't think who sent them," she said; "surely not Harry Napier. Why, what's this?"

An exquisite little ivory tablet, all inlaid with gold, fell from the glossy heart of one of the flowers, and hung gleaming by the scarlet thread which attached it to the stem.

She caught it up and examined it. It contained a few lines, very delicately written in scarlet ink.

"Dear me, this grows interesting," she said, hurrying to the window, and by the glow of the afternoon sunlight she read:

"Mrs. Lauderdale, come to the opera-ball to-night, and wear a white mask crowned with these scarlet camellias."

The mystic message bore no date or signature.

Cassie's cheeks glowed, and her black eyes flashed; the mystery of the affair charmed her.

"I'll go," she said. "Paris life was just getting a little stagnant, this comes in the very nick of time; I'll go, no matter what Lauderdale may say, 'Jeanette,' turning to the maid, 'put these wonderful camellias in water, then dress me for a drive; I'll wear that salmon silk, I think. While I'm away lay out that white silk with the golden stars, and procure me a white mask, I'm going to the opera-ball to-night.'"

Jeannette said "Oui, madame," and madame was dressed for a drive, and went down to the drawing-room. Mamma was there, and so was Mr. Lauderdale. He looked up from his English papers as his wife entered, and the aged, wearied expression of his face led one to fancy that the honeymoon of his married life had been somewhat short-lived. But his sad eyes turned very tenderly towards his beautiful young wife.

"My dear," he said, "I was just thinking of sending up to know if you wouldn't like to drive; the evening is so fine, and we don't go to the ambassador's dinner till late."

Cassie shrugged her shoulders beneath their costly drapery.

"I'm going to drive," she said, "with an old friend of mine. I had a note from him; Harry Napier, you know, mamma; he's only here for a few days, and we must treat him civilly. You can take mamma, Mr. Lauderdale; you'd not object to a drive, would you, mamma?"

"Dear me, no! I shall like it above all things. I've read till my head aches. You won't find me troublesome, Mr. Lauderdale."

Mr. Lauderdale bows, and avows his readiness to accompany his handsome mother-in-law, but he sighs deeply in the meantime; and his eyes linger on the superb figure of his wife, as she stands at the window, watching for the coming of her escort, with a wistful sorrow that is touching to see.

"And by-the-bye, my dear," she says, turning and laying her gloved hand on his arm, as Mr.

Napier's handsome turn-out whirls up to the curb below, "I shant go to the ambassador's dinner. Lord Holbrook invited me; but I hate those stupid dinners; besides, I want to go to the opera ball."

"The opera ball?" echoes Mr. Lauderdale; "my dear child, you mustn't go."

Her black brows lower, and a brassy glitter lights her black eyes.

"Why not, pray?"

"Because it isn't a fitting place for you. No genteel ladies go to the opera balls, Cassie."

"Oh, I know better than that. Lady Belton and Madame Le Cure and hosts of others I could mention, are going."

"No matter, if the empress herself goes, you cannot; I don't choose that my wife shall go to such places; I'm opposed to all sorts of masked parties," and there is a ring of decision in Mr. Lauderdale's voice that his young wife has never heard before.

She stands and looks at him, her red lips apart, revealing her pretty teeth, shut hard together, her eyes glittering defiantly.

"I'm not a child to be ordered to go or stay according to your caprice, Mr. Lauderdale," she said; "I am able to take care of myself anywhere, and I choose to go."

Her husband regarded her in sad silence for a full minute, and then he put his arm about her, and drew her close to his side.

"Haven't I done my best to make you happy, my darling?" he said, reproachfully. "This is the first time I ever thwarted a wish of yours; surely you can afford to give up this one little thing in obedience to my wishes."

Cassie pouted in pretty sullenness like a spoiled child.

Mamma made a swift sign from behind her novel.

"Cassie," she cried, "I'm surprised at you. Don't notice her, Mr. Lauderdale, she always had a spice of stubbornness in her character, but she won't disregard your wishes; I'll see that she don't."

"I wish her to submit willingly," said Mr. Lauderdale. "Cassie, dear wife, you know how glad and willing I am to give you pleasure. You won't think hard of me for this? But I know the sort of people that make up those opera balls, and I don't want you to go."

Mamma made a second sign.

"Well, I won't go then; there now, will that content you, you stupid old tyrant?" and Cassie put her two white hands on her husband's shoulders, and kissed him.

His grave, sad face lit up with rapturous surprise.

"Yes, that will content me; I am very much obliged to you, my love; ask anything else of me and you shall have your way."

"Mr. Napier's horses won't stand," cried Cassie; "I must go."

Her husband went down with her, and put her in the carriage by Mr. Napier's side.

"Oh heavens, what a bore!" she cried, sinking back amid the cushions, as the horses dashed off;

"Don't ever marry an ugly old woman for her money, Harry; one had better be poor than tethered to a death's head. I'm half sorry I didn't take you at your offer, and let Lauderdale and his money go."

"You are not half as sorry as I am, Cassie," answered the young man, his eyes full of bold admiration.

"Oh, well, it can't be helped now; and we should have hated each other before the honeymoon waned; love and poverty can't exist together. It is glorious to be rich! Oh, I've had a grand time in the last year! And Lauderdale's not one bit miserly; all I ask for, I get. He never denied me a thing until to-day."

"What was that? What is there in Paris, or even in the world, that Mrs. Lauderdale has not?"

"I want to go to the opera ball to-night, and Bluebeard swears that I shan't."

"You won't go, of course?"

"Won't I, Mr. Napier? You'll see! I'd like to have you for my escort, but Lauderdale may find it out, and come down upon us, like a wolf on the fold. If you're one bit afraid, say so, and I'll send a note to Jack Hazelton, of the guards; he'll go with me through floods and flames."

"So will I, and I feel injured that you should

doubt me, Cassie. Have I ever shown the white feather since I entered the ranks of your admirers?"

"Never, and I prefer you to all the rest—even to these new, titled fellows I've picked up since my marriage. Don't thank; I'm tired to death of thanks and flattery, and all that sort of stuff; hold your tongue and hear me. Lauderdale mustn't know, you see; I'll tell you how we'll manage it. You go home with me and accept my invitation for dinner. I shan't go to the ambassador's dinner, of course—I trust Lauderdale will, if he should not, however, I shall have a headache, and you leave early. At eleven o'clock precisely be at the corner of the Rue St. Marc, and you'll meet a white mask crowned with scarlet camellias. You'll do it?"

"If life lasts; and I shall wear a black domino. What an intriguist you have got to be, Cassie; one would take you for a born French woman."

Cassie shrugged her white shoulders and laughed.

"When one serves a master one does not love, one is forced to deceive," she said.

Mr. Napier watched her out of the corners of his handsome hazel eyes, and felt consoled for having lost her, mad as his passion had once been. After all, bewitching as she was, she was not quite the sort of woman to bear a man's name and be the mother of his children.

They drove until the sun went down, and the golden twilight fell over Paris and her countless steeples.

Then home again, to find dinner and mamma and Mr. Lauderdale awaiting them.

"Why in the world didn't you go to the ambassador's dinner, Mr. Lauderdale?" asked Cassie.

"I didn't care to go; the gay company there wouldn't welcome me very cordially if I went alone and left my beautiful young wife at home," said her husband, with a fond glance.

She curved her red lip.

"Bah! they're a set of stupid; I was bored to death the last time we went, and I've a headache this evening."

Nevertheless, dinner over, she played and sang, and had a game or two of cards with Mr. Napier. At ten o'clock she went up to her room.

"My love, let me get you something for your head," called Mr. Lauderdale, solicitously.

"Oh, thank you, no, I'm only tired; a good sleep will cure it; don't let me be disturbed, and good-night."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SCARLET MASK.

As the city clocks were striking eleven, Mrs. Lauderdale completed her toilet, and put on her white mask. She wore a robe of white silk, spotted with stars of gold, and garnished with rich lace, and wreathes of white flowers. On her bosom was a diamond aigrette, on her white arms were diamond bracelets, even on the buckles of her white satin boots these precious stones glittered.

The scarlet camellias, each separate flower caught and held by a star-like jewel, crowned her queenly head.

"Now, Jeannette, cover me with that dark mantle and I'll go down; and remember, if any one asks for me, I am sound asleep and you dare not disturb me. You understand, my good girl? and this for your reward."

"Jeannette said; 'Oui, Madame,' and slipped the gold piece in her bosom, her black French eyes glittering with satisfaction, and madam went noiselessly down, and out into the gay, gaslit streets of Paris.

Mr. Napier, wearing a black domino, was awaiting her at the corner of the Rue St. Marc; he put her in his carriage, and they whirled away.

"What a sinner I am," said Cassie, throwing off her black mantle; "poor old Lauderdale thinks I am safe and snug in bed this minute, and is breaking his silly heart over my headache. Mr. Napier, you think me atrociously wicked, now, don't you?"

"I think you dangerously bewitching, with that scarlet crown on your black locks. Where under the sun did you get such wonderful flowers?" Cassie made the night musical with her flute-like laughter.

"Where do I get all my wonderful things? Don't you know I am a sorceress, Mr. Napier?" she said; "my wishes are omnipotent; what I desire is mine."

"You desired this sort of life when you lived at that old country house, with your first husband, I suppose?" asked Napier curiously, "or was love all-sufficient then?"

"Hush," cried she, the color leaving her cheeks, "let bygones rest. Here we are at the opera ball."

They made their way into the vast salon, under arches of green and bloom, and trailing banners, and twinkling lights. Mrs. Lauderdale had seen a good deal in the way of gayety since her marriage, never anything like this. She caught her breath with a suppressed cry of delight, as her eyes took in the brilliant scene.

Wreathed banners, festooned flowers, flashing lights, and one wild, ceaseless crash of music that thrilled ones nerves into mad ecstasy; a dense throng crushing and crowding in every nook and corner, waltzing down the aisles, whirling and glancing like so many lunatics; and every soul masked, and attired in some fantastic costume. Knights and princes, beggars and harlequins, noble ladies, robed in satins and jewels, peasant girls showing their pretty feet under satin petticoats, all jostling and crowding in one gay, heterogeneous mass.

"Oh, I never dreamed of anything like this; I wouldn't have missed it for a kingdom; and Lauderdale to forbid my coming! the old dotard, I'll never forgive him while I live," whispered Cassie.

Her companion caught her in his arms, as a crash of waltz music shook the air, and they were whirled on with the rest.

The dance over, sitting in a little side nook with fruit and ices before her, she had time to look about. How was she ever to solve her mystery, she wondered. Dozens of masked cavaliers, struck by her brilliant appearance, were continually doing homage before her, and begging the honor of her hand. How should she know when the right one came?

She put her hand to her head to assure herself that her scarlet crown was all right, and having finished her refreshments, she nodded good-bye to Mr. Napier, and was whirled down the mad current with a gentleman who wore the nodding plumes and ancient garb of Henry of Navarre.

Her scarlet crown with its jewel stars flashed like a meteor through the gay rooms; one and another claimed her, and everyone wondered who and what she was. At last, utterly worn out in spite of her superb powers of endurance, and her intense enjoyment, she sat down in an embowered corner, to get her breath. Her escort left her to procure refreshments, and she was for the minute alone.

A sudden hand touched her shoulder, a voice whispered in her very ear.

"Mrs. Lauderdale!"

She looked up with a start.

It might have been the Prince of Darkness himself that stood beside her. A creature horned and hoofed, clad in black garments dashed with flame-like scarlet, and wearing and scarlet mask. A thrill of terror made her heart bound.

"Who are you?" she asked, feeling a curious conviction that this horned demon was the sender of the scarlet camellias.

He laughed, and the laugh made Mrs. Lauderdale's blood creep.

"Don't you know me, Mrs. Lauderdale? You are heartless to forget your old friends so soon. I am your Mephistopheles. Come!"

He proffered his arm, but she waved him from her.

"Go away, you horrid creature! I would as soon dance with Satan himself. I must find Mr. Napier."

"My dear, you must do no such thing, you must come with me. Don't you hear? I am your Mephistopheles; you wear my scarlet crown upon your head, you cannot resist me. Every human soul has either a good or an evil angel, and I am yours, Mrs. Lauderdale. Come."

A sudden conviction flashed upon her; she arose, trembling in every limb.

"What do you want of me? Why did you entice me here?" she demanded.

"I tempted you and you came; you cannot resist me; I told you long ago that I was your master. Ah, there goes our waltz. Is your husband here, Mrs. Lauderdale?"

"No; I came with Mr. Napier; she faltered, as she suffered him to clasp her waist.

"I am sorry," he whispered, bending his lips to her ear; "this is a fine place for dark deeds, and you wish the old dotard out of the way by this time, I'm sure; so do I; my patience is running to an end. I brought this little toy for your accommodation," touching a jeweled stiletto in his girdle; "it would have been the easiest thing imaginable to have given him a secret blow; one little blow would have been death, too; the point is tipped with poison."

Cassie recoiled from him with a cry of dismay.

"Let me go," she whispered, "let me find Mr. Napier."

He clasped her all the closer, his wild laughter ringing out.

"Why, you tremble like a dove in the talons of a hawk. You are not frightened, Mrs. Lauderdale? You wouldn't mind striking any one a blow with this pretty, poisoned little toy, I know; your husband, for instance, if he happened to be particularly in your way? Your scarlet crown becomes you well; Cleopatra never looked one whit more seductive when she sailed down to meet Marc Antony. Come, our dance grows exciting—you must keep in step."

And down the long length of salon they went; spinning round and round at a mad rate, the oddest pair that even Paris had ever coupled together, she with her starred robe, her glinting jewels and flame-like crown; and he, looking a very demon incarnate, his horns tipped with gold, his eyes glittering behind his scarlet mask.

Down and round they whirled, and people stood still and watched them with bated breath.

"Who the deuce has Mrs. Lauderdale picked up now!" thought Mr. Napier, as they flew by him; "some old lover, from the way he whispers in her ear. What an arrant flirt she is. No man in his senses ought to covet such a woman for his wife."

Yet his handsome, half-closed eyes flashed with jealousy as he noted how closely the scarlet mask held her.

They made the long length of the hall, and were returning, when Mrs. Lauderdale, without word or warning, fell in a shining heap at her companion's feet.

Mr. Napier pushed his way through the crowd, and caught the red demon by the arm, just as he was bearing her away.

"Give the lady to me," he said roughly; "who are you, that you presume to offer your services unasked?"

The scarlet mask resigned her, but he laughed derisively.

"You'll find out who I am, and all about my presumption in good time, Mr. Napier," he replied as he vanished in the crowd.

Mr. Napier got his charge out and into an ante-room as best he could. Then he tore off her scarlet crown, and her white mask, and ruined her laces and her golden stars by deluging her with water. Nevertheless it was sometime before she recovered from her fainting fit; when she did, she shuddered violently, and her eyes wandered round full of wild terror.

"Oh, take me home, take me home, Harry," she entreated; "don't let me see that terrible creature again."

"What business had you dancing with such an imp of Satan," said Mr. Napier, crossly, "why couldn't you stay with me? I bring you here, at the risk of getting shot at to-morrow, and you give me one dance as a reward; I shan't forget it. Who is that red devil?"

"Don't ask me. Oh, forgive me, Harry, and let me go home."

Her voice falters, and her color fades out again, and in mortal fear of another fainting fit, her escort gathers up her tumbled belongings, and gets her out, and into the waiting carriage, with all possible speed.

"Are we to drive home?" he inquires.

"Home," whispers Cassie; "oh, I was so

wicked to come; I wish, I wish now I had obeyed my husband."

Mr. Napier bites his handsome mustache.

"Complimentary with a vengeance," he mutters; "what riddles you pretty women are. I'd like to know what's gone amiss; I'll make it my business to unmask that red devil."

Mrs. Lauderdale sits silent, watching the dancing gaslights with wide, brooding eyes.

They reach the Hotel de Ville; she gets out, and whispering a hurried good-bye to Mr. Napier, she flits in, and up the stairs like a shadow.

As she passes her husband's room, the door opens, and he appears.

"You have come at last, Mrs. Lauderdale; I have been awaiting your return some time."

His voice is cold and stern: his face wears a look she has never seen before. Her very heart dies within her, her knees totter and tremble, and she falls prostrate at his feet.

"Oh, forgive me," she sobs out, "I'll never deceive you again—I wanted to go so bad—I was so curious to see what it was like, and it was horrid—the crowd crushed me—I got sick and fainted. Oh, Mr. Lauderdale, say you will forgive me."

He looks down an instant on her white, imploring face, and his eyes fill with tears; he raises her very tenderly.

"I forgive you," he says, slowly; "you are young and thoughtless; but, oh, my wife, I would rather have spent my whole fortune on you than you should have deceived me; I shall never trust you as I did again."

"Yes, you shall," and her arms encircle him, her cheek rests upon his breast, "we will leave this wicked, tempting Paris, and go home to Lauderdale Place, and I'll be the truest, most faithful wife that ever lived; we will go to-morrow—I'm sick of this life—promise me that we will!"

"Yes, we will go to-morrow," he answers, his eyes lighting with pleasure.

"That danger is well over," sighs Cassie, a minute later as she enters her own apartments, "heaven grant the other was past."

Meanwhile, Harry Napier drives back to the opera ball, and after some little search, encounters the scarlet mask.

"Who are you, sir!" he demanded, haughtily, his hand on the red gentleman's shoulder.

His demonship laughed derisively.

"What a question for an opera ball, Mr. Napier," he says; "do as I do—find out."

"I will," retorts Napier, his teeth set; and seizing upon the scarlet mask, he tears it off, and Count Ferdinand De Boganville stands revealed.

He bows with cool dignity, and takes a card from his pocket.

"An insult like this, Mr. Napier," he says, quietly, "calls for but one answer. There is my address; appoint your own time, and choose your own weapons for a speedy meeting."

"All right; you shall hear from me to-morrow; nothing could suit me better than to put a bullet through your impudent brain."

And Mr. Napier turns on his heel and walks away.

On the morrow a duel pends, and feeling a little sick at heart, as the fatal hour draws nigh, poor Harry seeks the Hotel De Ville, to bid Mrs. Lauderdale adieu. To his infinite surprise he finds that Mr. Lauderdale and his party left Paris three hours before.

At the dawn of the next day, under a wild, gray, rainy sky, the meeting takes place. Pistols are the weapons, and both gentlemen are said to be crack shots; nevertheless, poor Harry Napier's hand, so steady in general, so sure of its mark, shakes a little as he faces his mortal foe, and hears the fatal signal; and when he fires his bullet goes whizzing over Count De Boganville's head; not so with the Frenchman, his nerves are like steel, his aim unerring; he fires, and the ball is lodged in Mr. Napier's right breast, and the poor fellow falls face downward amid the wet grasses, and lies there, his life-blood flowing out in a crimson stream.

CHAPTER X.

AT LAUDERDALE PLACE.

SUMMER time at Lauderdale place; a soft, breezy summer evening. All the foliage of the trees; all the green of the thick growing shrubbery; all the grasses on the circling hills and smooth lawns, are wet from a recent shower. The flowers in the gardens send up clouds of intense perfume; the roses on the terrace hang sweet and red, and heavy in the soft, mellow light; in the magnolia trees a few yellow-throated birds dart and chipper, and all the blue odorous air is a-glitter with the flitting lamps of myriads of fire-flies.

The great, grand old house is all open from basement to turret, and on one of the low, vine-wreathed porticos sits Miss Agnes Lauderdale, the millionaire's only daughter.

She is dressed in simple white, a gold chain about her ivory throat, all her silken brown hair knotted back with a bunch of ribbons, just the color of her eyes, and in one dainty hand she holds a little toy of a basket filled to the brim with keys.

There is a shadow on her sweet, fair face, as she sits and watches the dancing fire-flies, and the silver bend of the river, and the town below, glowing red in the fire of the sunset, and her lips quiver slightly, but they part with a ready smile, and her eyes light as a door beyond her opens, and Mr. Falkland appears, wheeling an invalid's chair, in which sits a slight, pale youth before him.

"Ah, here you are," she cries; "lessons are all over for to-day! I was thinking, only a minute ago, that it was almost a sin to waste this charming afternoon over books."

Mr. Falkland laughs, and lifts a warning finger.

"Waste the afternoon, Miss Lauderdale! You mustn't talk any such treason as that in the presence of my pupil here."

"Ah, I shan't make any impression on him, Mr. Falkland; he's too fond of his books for that. Harry, dear," and her eyes turn fondly towards the crippled youth, "are you tired?"

"No, indeed, sis, not a bit. I wanted to go on with my Greek translation, but Mr. Falkland wouldn't allow it."

"Mr. Falkland was right," she replies, smoothing back the brown curls from his white, girlish forehead; "you confine yourself too much as it is—let me wheel your chair a little forward—that's it, now you have the town and the river right under your eyes, and only see the fire-flies; one might fancy one's self in Italy. Sit down, Mr. Falkland, and make yourself comfortable while I ring for some iced fruits."

The iced fruits are brought, and they sit and eat them together; as the twilight darkens. Harry Lauderdale, his wealthy father's only son and heir, has been a cripple and an invalid from his birth; and for the last year, since Mr. Lauderdale's second marriage, Mr. Falkland has been his tutor.

The arrangement came about by accident. Miss Lauderdale was out driving with her brother, and some trifling mishap befell the carriage, and it chanced that Mr. Falkland was at hand, and offered assistance. An acquaintance was the result, and in course of time, finding that the young lady was anxious to secure a competent tutor for her brother, the "recluse of the old river-house," as Mr. Falkland was called, offered to fill the post, and was accepted.

They sat together eating their iced fruits, and watching the fire-flies, and the shadow came back to Miss Lauderdale's face.

"The last few months seem like a dream," she said; "so quietly and happy, I can scarcely realize that papa is married, and will bring our new mother home to-night. They have been absent a year; you will think me an undutiful daughter, Mr. Falkland, not to feel more rejoiced at their coming, won't you?"

"No, Miss Lauderdale, very few persons in your position would rejoice at the coming of a step-mother."

The young lady laughed and jingled her pretty key-basket.

"Ah, well, I've reigned supreme ever since poor mamma's death," she said, half in jest, half in sorrow; "but the sceptre passes from my hand to-

morrow morning; I hope, oh, I hope very much that you will like Mrs. Lauderdale, Harry."

"Well, you cherish a vain hope, Aggie; I shall not and do not like her. In the first place, I abominate all sorts and shapes of dark women, and my father's second wife looks like a gipsy; and her eyes snap fire when she looks at you; and I'm sure beyond a doubt, if there's any truth in the old doctrine of the migration of souls, that at some time gone by Mrs. Lauderdale was a pantheress. If her dead nature should ever awaken, and she gets dangerous, Mr. Falkland, I shall pack up my belongings and come and live with you."

Mr. Falkland laughed, but there was a strange, wistful expression in his eyes.

"Very well, Harry, you will be heartily welcome, my dear boy; but I trust your father's handsome wife will make a good mother. She's been creating quite a sensation abroad, it appears."

"Oh, yes, and I detest women that raise a breeze wherever they go, and set men fighting over them like dogs over a bone."

"Why, Harry!" laughed his sister.

"He's studying the old authors, and uses terse and simple words," said Mr. Falkland. "Well," he continued, "the sun is quite down, and our lovely afternoon is ending. I must go; Miss Lauderdale, will it be agreeable for me to fetch Mrs. Lauderdale's little son to-night, or shall I wait?"

"Oh, dear, no, Mr. Falkland; bring him down to-night by all means; she will be anxious to see him, of course; and he will make this his home hereafter—he's such a dear little fellow, I shall be glad to have him."

"You are a very generous-hearted person, Miss Lauderdale," he said, as she accompanied him a little way beyond the rose terrace.

"Why, that's not generous, Mr. Falkland; I really like the child, he's so pretty and bright."

"Many would dislike him under the circumstances, Miss Aggie."

"Very unjustly, then; I shall love the little fellow very dearly, and I hope I shall be able to like my father's wife; but I'm sorry, on poor Harry's account, that papa is married. However, I won't borrow trouble, if she wants to lead a gay life, she can; we can have our happy little world all the same, can't we, Mr. Falkland?"

She turned her fair, smiling face upon him, and laid one white hand softly on his arm. An expression of sudden pain drifted over his face, but he answered pleasantly:

"Assuredly; as long as my humble services are needed, I shall be glad to continue them; that is, Miss Lauderdale, if I remain in the neighborhood!"

The last words seemed to cost him a great effort. She looked at him in amazement.

"Why, you don't think of going away, Mr. Falkland?"

"Yes, sometimes I do, Miss Lauderdale."

"Oh, why?" and her innocent eyes showed the regret she felt; "you have such a nice place—and we should miss you so; pray do not think of such a thing, Mr. Falkland."

The shadow of pain crossed his face again.

"We cannot always do the things we wish to do in this life, Miss Lauderdale," he said; "the force of circumstances drives us hither and thither independent of our wish or will; however, as you said a few minutes ago, we won't borrow trouble. You expect your father and his wife at nine? I'll come down about that time with the child."

"Yes, and you are to stay to dinner. I think they are bringing some friends with them. Let me give you a rose, Mr. Falkland, these are so sweet."

She broke off a few half-blown buds, and made them into a dainty nose-gay, and fastened them in his button-hole.

"See how nicely that looks," she said; "and now, good-bye; I must run and see that dinner is all right; if I do abdicate my throne to-morrow, I won't disgrace myself to-night. Don't be late, please, Mr. Falkland."

"What a sweet soul she is," he mused, walking rapidly riverward through the rank, wet grass; "her face is like her heart, fair and spotless as a lily."

He took the flowers from his buttonhole, and kissed them; but in the next breath his face darkened, and he flung them from him with a gesture of passionate pain and despair. "What right have I to think of her, to call her name

even?" he muttered, hurrying on with fierce strides; "am I so lost to all honor and manhood, that I would darken and desecrate her bright soul by the shadow of my wretched life? Never; yet day by day the witchery of her loveliness grows stronger; I must go, my only safety lies in flight."

* * * * *

Dinner was over, and Mr. and Mrs. Lauderdale, with their guests, had repaired to the drawing-rooms. Little Romney, radiant in blue velvet knickerbockers and laced ruffles, and long flaxen curls, was dancing to the music Miss Lauderdale played.

"He's a fine little fellow, my dear, and the image of his father," remarked Mr. Lauderdale.

Cassie flew at the child, and for the twentieth time smothered him with kisses.

"My darling, my pretty, pretty boy," she said.

"See how you're tumbling his curls and ruffles; why can't you let him alone?" cried Mrs. Preston.

"Why can't you mind your own business, Flavia? I haven't seen my darling for a year—think of that! And he has grown so. Mr. Falkland, how am I to repay you for taking such good care of him?"

"The occupation brought its own reward, Mrs. Lauderdale," replied Mr. Falkland, who was turning Miss Lauderdale's music; "I only wish you would consent to let the little fellow remain with me."

"Oh, dear, I couldn't think of that; I must have him all to myself now, Romney wants to live with mamma now, don't you darling?"

"No, I'm going back with Papa Falkland. I only come down to hear Miss Aggie sing," answered the boy, imperiously, struggling out of his mother's arms, and running over to Mr. Falkland's side.

He took him up and held him in a close embrace.

"I don't like to give you up, Romney," he said, his voice unsteady; "the old house will be dreadfully lonely without you, but mamma wants you, and you must stay with her like a good boy."

"I won't. I don't like mamma."

Lord Beresford laughed.

"The child's a relative of yours, Mr. Falkland, isn't he?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?" demanded Mr. Falkland.

"Because there's such a striking resemblance between you; you might be taken for father and son."

"I never heard anyone else say so," replied Mr. Falkland, stooping to embrace the child again.

Mrs. Lauderdale coaxed the child to her lap by showing him a gilded box of bon-bons, and Mr. Falkland bowed himself out.

"Othello's occupation's gone," he said, pausing beside his pupil's easy-chair on the terrace. "Mrs. Lauderdale has no farther need of me in the capacity of nurse. How is it with you, Harry? Are we to continue our Greek to-morrow?"

"Assuredly, sir. Why do you ask?"

"Oh! I didn't know but you'd like a holiday, with all this gay company in the house."

"Precious little care I for the gay company! No, I don't want a holiday, Mr. Falkland, thank you. How do you like my new mother?"

"I think she is very handsome, Harry."

"To be sure, and so is a sleek pantheress. Poor papa, what a mistake he made when he married her!"

"Hush, Harry," said his sister, joining them, "there is some one at the casement now—they might hear."

"Let them hear, then, with all my heart, Aggie; I don't care, I'm sure. I shan't try to make friends with Mrs. Lauderdale at all."

"Oh, Harry! she may be ever so agreeable; she appears to be, I'm sure, and she is so beautiful; I never saw anyone else half so beautiful."

"I have, then; and beauty's only skin deep, Aggie. Look at papa's face; why, child, he's come home to us an old man. One needs only to look at him to see how the land lies! One year married, and he is as haggard and careworn as if he'd gone through a campaign! Poor papa, she'll break his heart, and lay him in his grave before another year's over—the wicked, evil-eyed Circe."

Mr. Falkland did not utter a word; he stood looking up at the luminous sky and dancing fire-flies, with solemn, troubled eyes.

"Don't judge so harshly, please, Harry, dear,"

said the gentle sister; "let's hope for the best; papa may be happier now he's at home again, and Mrs. Lauderdale won't interfere with us, Mr. Falkland, and you and I will have our happy little world all to ourselves, won't we, Mr. Falkland?"

Mr. Falkland bowed and smiled.

"I shall always be at your service, Miss Lauderdale."

"Then come early to-morrow, and when Harry gets through with his lessons, we'll have a drive over the river."

"Very well. Good-night, Harry; good-night, Miss Lauderdale."

She put out her pretty white hand, he held it an instant and was gone.

Cassie Lauderdale turned away from the casement from which she had been leaning, with a brassy gleam in her black eyes.

"He's in love with her," she whispered between her white teeth, "and she with him. How dare she come between him and me, the pale, baby-faced creature? I'll teach her better; I'll put an end to all this pretty moon-light love-making. And that imbecile cripple, there. How dare he speak of me in that way! Mr. Lauderdale's son and heir. Ha! ha! ha! Only think of my pretty boy, my little Romney. If that puny dwarf were only in his grave, where he should be, my son might come in for the Lauderdale wealth. Ah, well," and the black eyes glittered, and the white, even teeth gleamed between the scarlet lips, "I have sold myself for a price; it will go hard with me if I lose it in the end."

CHAPTER XI.

THE NEW MAMMA.

"HERE are the keys, Mrs. Lauderdale, and as soon as you are at leisure, Mrs. Mason, the housekeeper, will receive your orders, and show you over the house."

Cassie looked up from the book of fashions on her lap, with wide, enquiring eyes. Agnes Lauderdale stood before her, proffering the pretty key basket, which she had carried since the day and hour of her mother's death.

"The keys," said Mr. Lauderdale's second wife, "why, what on earth do I want with the keys. What does she mean, Mr. Lauderdale?"

Mr. Lauderdale laughed.

"She is abdicating her throne in favor of her new mother, my love," he said; "she has ruled the household for years, and there never was a wiser head on such young shoulders; the very queen of housewives is my little Aggie; but very rightly, she is willing to resign her post to you."

"I don't want it," cried Cassie, "I don't know one thing about housekeeping; I wouldn't undertake such an awful, tiresome business for the world. My dear Aggie, keep your key-basket, and rule and reign as you have hitherto done. I shall never interfere with you."

Mr. Lauderdale looked inquiringly at his daughter.

"Your mother is so young and so inexperienced, Aggie," he said, "will it be asking too much of you? Are you unwilling to be mistress of your father's house a little longer?"

"Why, no, papa, if it will please you, certainly not; but as we are to have so much company, I must leave a good deal to Mrs. Mason; I must not neglect Harry, you know."

"Certainly not, but you can retain your little key-basket, dear, and continue to issue orders, until your mother gets accustomed to her new position, and I hope, Aggie," he continued, his eyes full of entreating love, "I hope that you and Cassie will be good friends, and love each other, for my sake."

"I am sure I am willing, papa," said the girl, cheerfully. "I shall do my best to make mamma happy," and crossing to Cassie's chair, she bent over her and kissed her.

"You are very kind, and I am very much obliged to you, I'm sure," said Cassie, but she did not return the caress, and there was a hard, cold glitter in her eyes.

Her husband sighed heavily as his daughter left the room.

"She is such a good girl, Cassie," he said, bending over his wife, and toying with her curls; "so

gentle and obliging, and affectionate; you'll be sure to like her; and there's Harry, poor fellow, he's been a cripple from his birth, and he's a little shy and sensitive. I wish you'd try and make friends with him, my dear. Now, I feel already by your little boy as if I were his father, and I shall deal with him as I do with my own children. You, Cassie, as you know, are the idol of my heart—I love you as I never loved another woman. My fortune is at your command, you shall have everything you desire; in return I only ask you to be loyal to me, and kind to my children; I am not asking too much, my darling?"

"Too much? You silly old soul, no! Haven't I promised you to be a true and loving wife? I'll be a good mother, too; we shall be great friends in no time, Aggie and I, only, upon my word, I can't consent to housekeep."

And she threw her book across the room, and caught him round the neck and kissed him.

"My darling, my own beautiful darling!" he murmured, straining her to his heart. "Oh, Cassie, I was beginning to fear I had made a great mistake, but you do care for me a little."

"I care for you a great deal. I would sooner be your wife than any other man's living; never doubt me again."

"I never will, and now my darling, good-bye; I shall not be able to return until dinner; in the meantime, take care of yourself, and do as you will! The stables are at your command, and so is my bank book, and I give you *carte blanche* for any and everything. Good-bye!"

She caught and kissed him again; but the instant he had passed the door, she made a grimace, and fell to rubbing her red lips with a perfumed sponge.

"Bah! the price is a fearful one," she said, "it makes me sick; I'd as soon be forced to kiss a monkey. I'm too good a loyal wife and a good mother, and maybe a pattern housewife in the end; and have my domestic virtues carved upon my tombstone! Ah, it is too rich! But his fortune is at my command, and I've *carte-blanc* for any and everything; that's compensation."

She whirled across the room and faced the long mirror.

"She's pretty," she continued, surveying her own superb figure; Miss Agnes Lauderdale, she's pretty beyond a doubt. Her face is like a lily, and I am gipsy brown. Nevertheless every other man I met abroad went mad over me. I've never had a rival yet; I hardly think I need fear one in her. She's good, too, and I detest good people. My prophetic soul tells me; despite all my promises, that Mr. Lauderdale's daughter and Mr. Lauderdale's wife will never be bosom friends."

She smoothed down the laces about her dusky throat, caught up her heavy, purplish black braids with a jeweled arrow, fastened with a tuft of scarlet bloom in her bosom, and went down.

Half way down the hall she paused, arrested by the sound of voices on the veranda. The open casement was near, she tiptoed across, and seated herself beneath it. It was one of Mrs. Lauderdale's weaknesses, an inborn love of eavesdropping.

"There's no comparison between the two, by jove!"

It was Lord Beresford's voice that uttered these words, and looking askance she saw him, his chair tilted back, his feet on the banister, his handsome head wreathed in a cloud of tobacco-smoke.

"Miss Lauderdale is very fair," put in Captain Rowland, one of Cassie's latest conquests, "but she can't come up to Madame. I don't think there's another woman in the world as handsome as she is; 'tis a mortal sin to see her old Lauderdale's wife!"

Lord Beresford laughed lightly.

"Ah, Rowland, poor fellow, your fever's young! I thought the same thing a week ago. I was mad over her in Paris. I followed her across the sea, and had serious thoughts of putting a spider in Lauderdale's dumpling; but I am disenchanted now! I tell you, Agnes Lauderdale's a hundred per cent. lovelier, and she's a woman one can trust, too, which can't be said of black-eyed Cassie!"

Black-eyed Cassie bit her red lips fiercely, and clenched her white, ringed hands. Lord Beresford had been one of her most devoted slaves. She had not dreamed that he could be disloyal.

"I hate her," she said, in an intense, sibilant whisper; "I wish she were dead."

She crept away from the casement, and passed through an open window to the southern terrace. At the far end a charming picture greeted her. Harry Lauderdale was seated in his easy-chair, under the shade of a trailing vine, his books scattered about him; at a little distance, Agnes was established on a cushion, a basket of gay silks in her lap; a skein of scarlet on her white hands which Mr. Falkland was winding, at the same time giving his attention to his pupil. The girl's bright hair was all put back from her fair face, and she was looking up with eyes full of happiness and innocent love.

Cassie's dusky cheeks whitened, and her eyes shot fire, as she stood and watched them. Since the hour she became Romney Lysle's bride, no man had ever moved her selfish, cruel heart, as this strange, reticent recluse had done. Even amid the gayeties of the French capital, with titled lover at her feet, she had thought of him, the man who had saved her life, with a curious thrill, which nothing else had power to awaken. Her one inducement to return to Lauderdale Place had been her desire to meet Mr. Falkland. And here he was at the feet of Agnes Lauderdale, utterly oblivious of her very presence.

She watched them a minute, her eyes a-glitter, her white teeth set; then humming a gay *chanson* she advanced.

"Do I intrude?" she asked smilingly, pausing a few steps off.

Mr. Falkland bowed profoundly, and drew forward a chair. Aggie sprang up, scattering her gay silks about.

"Intrude, mamma? no, indeed; we are glad to have you come, aren't we, Harry?"

Harry looked up from his exercise book, with a twinkling smile in his brown eyes.

"Assuredly, Aggie, we are very glad to see Mrs. Lauderdale."

Cassie laughed, as she accepted the seat.

"I beg your pardon, Master Harry," she said, merrily, "but I don't believe you. Your eyes contradict your words; in your heart this minute you are wishing I would take myself off; but I shan't, and to-morrow I shall come again. I've promised your father to make friends with you, and I shall keep my word."

"Harry will be shy and offish, it's his way, I suppose," put in Aggie; "you mustn't mind him, mamma; he's the best fellow in the world at heart."

"I don't doubt it," replied the handsome step-mother; "we shall get on famously when we are better acquainted. Don't let me interfere with your lessons, Mr. Falkland. By the by, my little Romney begins to say his B C's, as he calls 'em. I shall soon want you to be giving him lessons; you might begin now; an hour every morning when you are over with Harry, will do him no harm; the dear little fellow is so fond of you, too."

Mr. Falkland's troubled eyes lit with pleasure.

"I shall be very willing to do so, Mrs. Lauderdale," he said; "if you like, we'll begin to-morrow."

"Very well: you can come to my sitting-room when you are ready, and I'll pay you whatever you ask. Good morning, sir. Good morning, Harry, I won't interrupt you a minute longer. Aggie, love, you are not busy? Then come with me; we are planning a grand dinner and ball for the opening of the shooting season, and your dear papa, bless his generous heart, gives us permission to be just as extravagant as we like. I'm ordering my finery this morning, and I thought it would be nice to send for yours, too; so we must have a consultation at once. Mamma will help; she's a perfect artiste in dress matters—I'm ordering maize silk for dinner, and pink and tulle for the ball. Blue is your color, pale blue and pearl white, but only look at Harry there, he's making fun of us, and so is Mr. Falkland, I daresay. Let's turn our backs on them and their stupid books."

Linking her arm in Aggie's, she drew her away. Mr. Falkland's eyes darkened gloomily as he looked after them.

"You don't admire Mrs. Lauderdale, Mr. Falkland?" said Harry.

The gentleman turned to his books with a sigh.

"I admire her Harry," he said. "She is a brilliantly beautiful woman; but I am sorry now your father married her."

"I was sorry at the outset," said the boy, "and all hands will be sorry before the end comes; I wish she'd let Aggie alone; she's not the sort of woman I should choose for my sister's companion."

Mr. Falkland only sighed.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EXCITING RACE.

The shooting season was ushered in with great promise after the gay summer. Lauderdale Place was crowded with guests, gentlemen and ladies from neighboring towns, titled friends from abroad.

Already the great oaks in the park had put on their Autumn livery of gold and crimson; hoar-frost glittered on the brown hills, and in the russet meadows; partridges and pheasants whirled through the smoky silence, blackbirds whistled in the hazel coppice, and wild turkeys piped in the deep woods.

The morning of the great dinner and ball day dawned, and as the clock above the stables struck six, Lauderdale Place was all alive. On the green in front of the stately old home, a dozen or more horses stood all equipped for the fox hunt which was to be the first event of the day. The hounds, let loose from their kennels, ran hither and thither wild with impatient joy; and the gamekeeper, mounted on a piebald nag, filled the morning air with the windings of his mellow horn.

Mr. Lauderdale was bustling about, his face all aglow with pleasure, and on the terrace, surrounded by some half dozen gentlemen, stood his wife.

She wore a riding habit of black velvet, buttoned to the throat with ruby buttons, which flashed in the sunshine like so many points of flame. A black hat, ornamented by a long scarlet plume, covered her graceful head.

"I shall ride Black Bess," she cried, pointing toward a slim blooded mare which stood near, tugging restively at her bit, "and I'll wager anything I'll reach Hazel Bottom a hundred yards ahead of you all. What do you say, gentlemen? Who'll be my escort?"

For the space of a full minute not one of the half-dozen gentlemen spoke, for just then Agnes Lauderdale appeared in the doorway, and looked smilingly out upon the lively scene.

Her hat and habit were dark rich blue, and her sweet, girlish face shone like a pearl under her nodding, white plumes.

Lord Beresford darted towards her, utterly ignoring his hostess in his eagerness to secure Miss Lauderdale.

"Miss Lauderdale," he began, breathlessly, "which horse do you ride? May I hope for the honor of being your escort?"

"Tell him no, Miss Lauderdale," cried Captain Carruthers, pushing up, "he's a wretched rider, Beresford is, 'pon honor; and I'm the crack horseman of my regiment; let me ride with you, I beg."

"No, no, Miss Lauderdale," put in Harry Napier, sauntering up, his handsome face quite pale from the long and deathly illness which had followed his duel with the scarlet mask. "I think it was understood that you would accept me! I'm a stranger, and on the invalid list, too, and you promised to take me under your wing."

Miss Lauderdale laughed merrily.

"Really, gentlemen, you overwhelm me," she replied. "I'm ever so much obliged, and highly honored; and I'd like to accept you all; but the truth must be told, I've made a prior engagement; I've promised to ride with Mr. Falkland."

At that instant Mr. Falkland appeared, equipped for the hunt, and the disappointed gentlemen fell back and went to seek companions elsewhere.

Harry Napier, who had only arrived at Lauderdale Place a few days previous, made his way to Cassie's side. She was flirting furiously with the son of a neighboring squire, her eyes like flashing stars, her cheeks like flame.

"My dear Mrs. Lauderdale, you know I'm the best rider on the ground," he began, "shall I have the honor—"

She cut him short with a gesture of imperious scorn.

"No, sir; did you ever know me to accept what another had refused? I ride with Mr. Clements."

Napier bowed, and took himself off; an amused smile in his brown eyes, while young Clements, in a glow of delight and confusion, hurried away to have Black Bess brought around.

Mrs. Preston, who was to drive with her mother to the meet, pushed up to her sister's side.

"Dear me, Cassie," she whispered, "I pity you, I do, indeed."

Cassie turned upon her with flashing eyes.

"You envy me, you mean, Flavia; wait until to-night, my dear; you haven't seen the beginning of my splendor yet."

Flavia laughed, but her soul was full of bitterness and envy.

"I pity you, nevertheless," she went on. "Look at that girl yonder—Miss Lauderdale, I mean! Your devoted cavaliers have no eyes for you when she is present. And she is pretty—a great deal prettier, with her fair face, than you are. I've always noticed that men tire soon of gipsy beauty. My poor Cassie, you have met with your match at last."

Cassie set her teeth hard, watching Miss Lauderdale, as Mr. Falkland put her in the saddle. Often and again she had hurt and wounded poor Flavia, by referring to her plain face, and now, watching her opportunity, Flavia had paid her back with interest. Tears of rage and wounded vanity rose in her eyes, and she bit her lips till the blood was ready to start.

"And she's such a favorite with her father too," continued Mrs. Preston, "she'll soon influence him against you. And there's that crippled boy. Pres-

ton says that Lauderdale's made his will, and he, the cripple, I mean, inherits every rood of land, and the better part of everything else. So you see, Cassie, there's no need to carry your head so high, you haven't made such a fine marriage, after all; the little you get now will be about all you will get; so I'd advise you to make hay while the sun shines."

Cassie uttered no word in answer, she only shut her teeth hard, and drew her breath rapidly. Mrs. Preston looked at her askance, with evident enjoyment of the situation.

Mr. Clements returned, and led Black Bess close to the steps.

"Oh, Cassie, my dear, you mustn't think of riding that mare," cried Mr. Lauderdale, hurrying up; "she's a vicious creature, and not to be trusted. Mr. Clements, take her back, and order the roan."

"I won't ride the roan, I shall ride Black Bess," and with one flying leap she was in the saddle.

Her husband caught the reins, and looked up at her with anxious, pleading eyes.

"Cassie, you must not."

But she shook her bridle loose, and plunged the tiny gold spur, on her boot heel, into the mare's flank. She darted down the drive like a swallow. Mr. Clements, leaping into his saddle, followed.

Cassie turned and looked over her shoulder as she reached the open field.

"Now for Hazel Bottom," she cried, waving her gloved hand, "who can reach it before me?"

Black Bess went like the wind, and the young squire thundered on behind, on his gray hunter, and the rest of the party brought up the rear.

"Aggie," called Harry, from his low pony carriage, "you and Bonny Belle can beat Black Bess; why don't you try?"

Aggie's blue eyes were all aglow.

"Shall I?" she asked.

She was a born horsewoman.

Mr. Lauderdale, forgetting his anxiety in excited enjoyment, smiled and nodded his head.

Agnes bent over her little brown mare's neck and whispered a few soft sentences, then she said, "Now, Mr. Falkland," and shook out her reins.

Bonny Belle was off like a shooting star. In ten minutes she ran neck and neck with Black Bess. Mr. Falkland and Mr. Clements were left a dozen yards behind.

"I'll beat you, mamma, if you don't look out," cried Aggie, gleefully, sitting her horse like a graceful statue, her bright curls streaming on the wind.

The gentlemen began to cheer, and to bet on the race.

"Aggie will win; she's the finest little horsewoman in the country," said Mr. Lauderdale; then raising his voice, he shouted, "Give it up, Cassie, give it up."

But Mrs. Lauderdale set her lips, and dug her golden rowels into her horse's flank.

"She sha'n't win the race, if she does I'll murder her," she said under her breath, her cheeks growing white with anger and excitement.

Side by side the two horses flew on.

"I'll beat you, mamma, dear," laughed Agnes again, as Bonny Belle's head began to take the lead. Cassie answered not a word, she only urged her horse on.

Presently they came in sight of a hedge right across their way.

"Don't try it, Cassie; Black Bess is not to be trusted," shouted Mr. Lauderdale.

But his wife took no heed. On they went, Agnes bent again over Bonny Belle's neck, and whispered in her ear; then she drew her reins tight, and cleared the hedge at one safe and graceful leap. Mrs. Lauderdale essayed to follow.

"Over this instant," she commanded, driving the spur into her horse.

But Black Bess flattened her pointed ears, and showed her white teeth viciously, and instead of making the leap, she shied suddenly, and threw her rider over her head into a pool of stagnant water.

There was a simultaneous cry of alarm, and in a trice, half a dozen pairs of hands were helping to get the dripping, disheveled lady on her feet.

"My love, you are not hurt?" cried the anxious husband.

Cassie pushed him from her almost fiercely.

"No, I wish I was; I'd rather have broken my neck than lost the race," she said sullenly.

Aggie, who was out of her saddle and beside her, put her arms about her.

"Oh, mamma, I'm sorry. You are sure you are not hurt?"

"Go away; don't speak to me; I hate you," cried Cassie, angrily; but seeing the girl's amazed face, in the next instant she regained her self-command.

"What did I say?" she asked, bursting into a fit of laughter; "don't mind me, Aggie, dear, I was jolted out of my senses for the minute. No, I'm not a bit hurt, and you are the finest horsewoman in the country."

"There's not a man in our regiment can beat her," said Captain Carruthers, enthusiastically.

"I've lost a gold watch on the race, but I congratulate you, Miss Lauderdale," said Harry Napier.

Agnes laughed and blushed, and gave her hand to Mr. Falkland to be replaced in her saddle.

"And what will you do, my dear?" asked Mr. Lauderdale of his wife; "you can't go to the fox-hunt in this plight."

"No, I've had enough of it; ask Flavia to drive me home."

Flavia consented, and Cassie, all muddy and torn, was stowed away in her carriage.

"I told you how it would be, didn't I?" said the tender sister prophetically; "you've found your match at last, Cassie; Mr. Lauderdale's daughter surpasses you in everything; you might have known she'd win the race."

"It is the greatest pity in the world that Mr. Lauderdale has any children," remarked mamma, gathering up her skirts from contact with Cassie's wet garments.

Cassie herself uttered not a word. She sat still, and thoughtful, and silent until they reached home; then she ran up to her dressing-room and locked herself in.

* * * * *

The fox hunt was over, and the gay party had come home to lunch, still Mrs. Lauderdale did not appear.

Her husband went up to her room with an anxious face.

"I'm afraid she's received some sort of hurt from that terrible fall," he thought, as he rapped loudly at her door.

In a few minutes the key turned, and Cassie appeared, laughing and rubbing her eyes.

"I've been having such a glorious nap," she said; "what time is it?"

"We are all back from the hunt, and lunch is over. My dear, I have felt so uneasy for fear you might be hurt after all."

"Well, I'm not hurt; my bones are all safe and sound; but my elegant new riding habit is ruined. I wish I had not been so foolish."

"Never mind the habit, you can easily replace it; I'm thankful you escaped unhurt. Black Bess is a wicked beast. Poor little Aggie is dreadfully anxious. She didn't enjoy the fox-hunt at all. She seems to think that you will feel offended because she won the race."

Cassie laughed pleasantly, but there was a curious, brassy glitter in her eyes.

"I'm not such a goose as that. I'll make it all right with her when I go down; what a splendid rider she is."

Mr. Lauderdale's eyes shone with fatherly pride and affection.

"Yes, Aggie rides well; I've never seen a woman that could excel her; and she's such a good, gentle child, too. Cassie, my love," and he established himself comfortably in a rocking-chair, and drew his wife down upon his knee, "I want to talk to you; 'tis an hour or two before dressing time yet, and they're all at croquet down stairs, so there's no hurry. Now, what do you think happened today?"

"I fell in a mud-puddle, for one thing, Mr. Lauderdale."

"So you did, my dear, but I wasn't alluding to that. Would you believe it? I've had two proposals for my little daughter's hand since breakfast."

"That's not surprising; Aggie is a beautiful girl, and you are wealthy enough to give her a splendid dowry."

"True enough; but I was taken by surprise, all the same. I did not dream that Lord Beresford had any notion of Aggie; I fancied, my dear," and the elderly husband laughed a trifle uneasily, "that he belonged to your train of admirers."

Cassie bit her lip hard, but she answered quite serenely.

Lord Beresford proposed for her, then?"

"Yes, and in a very flattering manner, too; I'm satisfied he's fond of the little girl; and it would be a splendid alliance. I wish from the bottom of my heart she'd accept him."

"She will, no doubt."

"Not a bit of it—I spoke to her on the subject not ten minutes ago, and she seemed dreadfully distressed. She cried, and clung about my neck, and said she never could love Lord Beresford; and begged me not to make her leave me and Harry, in a way that was absolutely distressing."

"And the other proposal? Whom did that come from?"

"Why, you wouldn't guess in a week."

"Was it Captain Carruthers?"

"No, it was Napier."

Cassie fairly started to her feet.

"Harry Napier?" she cried.

"Harry Napier; and upon my soul I believe he's in dead earnest; he promised to reform, and to devote his life to her, and all that sort of thing, you know, and I felt sorry for him, poor fellow. Of course the thing was out of the question. I could never think of marrying my daughter to a man like him."

"And what did Aggie say?" asked his wife, in a breathless sort of whisper.

"Oh, she said no, of course. She don't care a pin for him or any of the rest of them. There's Carruthers has his eye on her, I'm pretty sure, and young Selby, too, but she'll have none of them. She packs it all upon Harry; she could never go away from him, but poor little girl, I'm certain she's got some trouble at heart, Cassie," and he held his wife's hand close, "you'll never hint at such a thing, I know, but between you and me, I'm afraid the little girl's growing fond of that fellow, Falkland."

His wife buried her pretty teeth in her red lip.

"Why he's never proposed for her, has he?" she asked.

"Never hinted at such a thing, but I'm afraid I'm not mistaken. He's a handsome, winning sort of fellow, and Aggie is young and they have been thrown so much together. I must contrive to put a stop to it somehow. Maybe, if Falkland was out of the way there might be some chance for Lord Beresford. I wish it could be so; I'd like to see the little girl well settled before I die."

"Why, you don't think of dying soon, do you?" laughed his wife.

He drew her close to his breast and kissed her.

"I trust not, Cassie. I've no wish to die at present, life is very sweet since you are my own; but, dearest, I've never spoken of it before; all my family are subject to heart disease. I've had symptoms of it for years; nothing to be alarmed at, you under-

stand, but then I might go off without a moment's warning, you know."

"Don't talk so," she said, her voice hoarse, her breath coming fast.

"My love! my darling wife," he cried, "would it grieve you much to lose me?"

She hid her face in his breast.

"I've done my best to make you happy," he went on, stroking her hair, "and I trust that heaven will give us many happy years together; nevertheless it is always well to set one's house in order. I've arranged all my affairs, so that every thing will go straight, no matter when I am called. Poor Harry, poor boy, of course he will come in as my heir; the Lauderdale property has descended intact from father to son for I can't tell how many years, and Harry will succeed me; but, Cassie, I have provided handsomely for you and your boy; and in case of Harry's death, unless Aggie should have a son to heir it, the landed property will go to you and your child. I've got it all down to my satisfaction in black and white."

"What makes you speak of such things? You are not going to die?" she said, her face still hidden.

"I don't know; I had no thought of running into all this when I came up here, but it has been on my mind for some time, and I feel relieved since I've spoken. I hope to live to a good old age, but if it should be otherwise, Cassie, if I do go without warning, as so many of my ancestors went before me, you'll be kind and faithful to my children, as I have been to you?"

"I will!"

"God bless you, darling!"

He raised her hidden face and kissed it tenderly. It was as white as ashes, and her lips shook and trembled.

"I have frightened you, my poor darling," he said; "forgive me; but it is such pleasure, dear, to know that you will grieve to lose me. There, there, jump up and get back your roses; I hear the first bell, we mustn't forget that our grand dinner and ball comes off to-night. I'll go down and let you dress."

He went, closing the door after him. His wife sat where he left her, her hands locked together, her eyes staring into vacancy. At last her lips moved.

"If ever a human soul was given over to the temptations of the devil, mine is," she whispered, hoarsely; "how can I resist—how can I, when the way is made so plain for me!"

CHAPTER XIII. THE COUNT'S GIFT.

"Mamma, may I come in?"

"Open the door, Jeanette," commanded Mrs. Lauderdale.

She was in full dress for the ball. Rose-pink silk all frosted with priceless laces, diamonds on her neck and arms, diamonds and pink buds amid the bands of her raven hair.

Aggie, in pure white, with a few shimmering pearls and blue forget-me-nots entered.

"Papa said I might come," she began, and then stopped short, with a cry of admiration.

"Oh, mamma, mamma, how beautiful you are!"

Cassie laughed, as she drew the girl's arm within her own.

"Not one bit more beautiful than you are, my little Aggie," she replied.

They descended the stairs, and entered the drawing-room arm in arm.

The spacious rooms were well filled, and out on the lawn, where a banquet table was spread, and a band was playing, there were scores of people, invited guests, and Mr. Lauderdale's tenants.

"I and Bonny Bell beat you in the race, mamma," whispered Aggie, affectionately, "but you are queen to-night. There's not a lady here one-half so handsome as you are, is there, papa?"

"No, nor in the round world," said Mr. Lauderdale, joining them.

A few steps off, in the recess of a bay window, Mr. Falkland stood watching their entrance. His sad eyes lit with admiration, and a vivid flush dyed his pale cheeks, as Aggie caught sight of him, and beckoned him to her side.

He made an eager step towards her, then as suddenly drew back, and disappeared through the window.

All the happy light died out of the girl's innocent eyes, and her father, who had taken note of the little scene, looked grave and troubled.

As soon as he found an opportunity he slipped out of the brilliant room, and went in search of his son's tutor. He soon found him, seated on the back portico, with little Romney on his knee.

"Send the boy to his nurse, Mr. Falkland," said Mr. Lauderdale, gravely; "I have a few words to say to you."

"Run away, Romney, and hear the music," said Mr. Falkland, putting the child from him.

Mr. Lauderdale cleared his throat several times before he found courage to begin.

"It is a very delicate matter of which I am going to speak, Mr. Falkland," he said, at last; "it pains me so to do so, that I should certainly keep silent, but for a keen sense of duty to my child. My child, Mr. Falkland, for it is of my daughter, Agnes, I am about to speak."

Mr. Falkland sat like an image carved of stone, his white, sad face full of silent pain.

"In the last few hours," continued the embarrassed father, "I have had very flattering and desirable proposals for my daughter's hand in marriage, but she refuses to listen to any of them. Something seems to trouble the girl, and I have feared—upon my soul, sir, I don't know how to get at the point in question. You're a man of honor, I take it, Mr. Falkland; you'll understand my motive, and take no advantage of what I'm saying, of course? Well, I'm afraid, sir, I've been led to think that my

daughter Agnes is getting to be too much attached to her brother's friend and tutor, than is good for her own peace of mind. There now, the mischief's out at last, a hard thing, too, for a father to say of his daughter; now, sir, what have you got to say for yourself in this matter?"

Mr. Falkland uttered not a word.

He only covered his face with his hands, and sat motionless.

Mr. Lauderdale's anger began to kindle.

"What am I to take you for, sir?" he demanded.

"I've considered you a gentleman, and allowed you free access to my house. Have you taken unfair advantage of my daughter's youth and innocence?"

"Never, Mr. Lauderdale, never, on my soul!"

"I'm glad of it! Girls are silly creatures at Aggie's age, and she'll soon outgrow this foolish fancy when you are once out of her sight. I hate to see you go, on my poor boy's account, he's so fond of you; but under the circumstances, Mr. Falkland, if you are the man I take you to be, you won't wait for me to ask you to leave the neighborhood."

"No, sir, I'll go at once—to-night! I ought to have gone months ago! Don't think worse of me than I deserve, Mr. Lauderdale; I'm not a villain at heart."

He arose and stood in the light of the swinging lamps. A man of rare attraction, and winning manner. No wonder little Aggie's girlish heart had gone out to him. Mr. Lauderdale was a tender father, and his eyes filled at the thought of the pain this sudden departure might cause his innocent child.

"There's no other way," he said hesitatingly;

"I can't see what else can be done. I don't know that you care for my daughter, Mr. Falkland, and even if you did"—

The other put forth his hand with a gesture of unutterable agony.

"For heaven's sake, spare me, sir," he said, his voice hoarse with suppressed emotion, "I do care for her, I would die cheerfully this hour to spare her innocent heart one moment's pain, but I've no right to say even this much, my life is under a curse, sir, which must forever make me an outcast on the face of the earth."

"Then why did you worm yourself into my family, and into my children's affections?" asked Mr. Lauderdale, angrily.

The wretched man stood silent, his features working with terrible anguish.

"Forgive me, sir," he said at last, his voice broken.

"I had no thought of anything like this. Heaven knows I have done no wrong."

"That may be," said the father; "but as I take it, a man whose life is under a curse, has no right to force his way into happy home circles where there are no hidden skeletons. However, the injury you have done may be easily remedied, when you are once out of the way."

"I will go out at once, Mr. Lauderdale."

Mr. Lauderdale rose and put forth his hand. Something in the man's face touched him in spite of his vexation.

"Thank you, sir," he said, "and if I have been rough forgive me: an only daughter's happiness is very dear to a father's heart. In conclusion, do me the favor to call at my counting-house to-morrow morning, and I'll remunerate you for whatever losses this sudden departure may involve."

"Don't insult me, Mr. Lauderdale," cried Falkland, withdrawing his hand, as if the words stung him; "I am not so fallen as to be paid for doing an honorable act. Good-evening."

And before the other could utter a word of remonstrance, he was gone.

Cassie Lauderdale, who had heard the entire conversation from the casement of a little reading-room adjoining the rear drawing-room, made her way out of the house with colorless cheeks and excited eyes. In that moment she was fully conscious, for the first time of the strong interest she felt in this strange man. Her heart went out after him with a passionate pity and a tenderness strongly akin to love. And her heart was utterly selfish; the thing she fancied and coveted must be hers, no matter what the result might be.

"They shall not send him away," she said in a panting whisper, as she flew down the terrace steps, and out into the lamplit grounds, "he shall stay, and I'll teach him to forget her."

She soon struck the little winding path that led to the river, and a few steps ahead of her, she caught sight of the object of her search. He was standing quite still, his arms folded across his chest, his eyes riveted upon the house he was leaving forever.

"Mr. Falkland," she called softly, stealing up to his side, and laying her hand on his arm.

He gave a great start, and turned his anguish-stricken face upon her.

She looked up at him, her dusky eyes aglow with passion, her jewels flashing, her fragrant, rose-hued garments trailing about her feet.

"Mrs. Lauderdale?" he faltered.

"Don't go," she whispered, her voice and eyes full of soft entreaty, "I want you to stay!"

He caught her arm in a grasp so fierce and sudden, that she could have cried out with pain.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, his eyes glowing upon her.

"I want you to stay," she repeated, her soft fingers closing on his hand: "it is cruel to send you away because of a silly girl's fancy; let her go, and stay for my sake!"

He flung her hand off, as if it had been a viper.

"For your sake," he said, his face full of angry disgust, "and you a wife, the wife of a trusting, loving husband! What do you take me for? For shame, for shame, I believe you vain, and cruel, and frivolous; I never thought you could fall so low as this. Ah, heaven! my punishment is just, I might have averted all this trouble and shame!"

And without a word of farewell, he strode rapidly away.

Cassie Lauderdale's face was a study, as she stood looking after him.

Wounded vanity, insulted pride, and selfish passion struggled in her working features, and deadly anger lit her eyes with baleful fire.

"It is her work," she hissed out through her shut teeth, "it is all her doing; he is gone, and I have scarcely a friend left; Flavia was right; she surpasses me in everything. She shall pay for it. Oh, as sure as I'm a living woman, Agnes Lauderdale shall rue the day she ever came between me and my desires."

The green, lamp-lit trees waved in the crisp autumn wind; overhead soared a full moon in a lustrous sky; beyond flowed the dark, complaining river. She stood and looked at it, flowing darkly beneath the moon, and at the old house on the lonesome hill, a single light glowing like a star in its westward window. But her desperate face did not pale or soften, nor a tremor shake her lithe, strong limbs.

She had outlived her old horror, and grown familiar with the dim remembrance that sometimes haunted her of that awful, hidden crime.

She did not even fear that awful face now; she persuaded herself that from first to last it had only been a vision conjured up by her distempered fancy. "The dead do not come back," she argued, "and Romney Lysle's face cannot rise out of the river sands to accuse me."

But something almost as terrible as an accusing ghost, haunted her day and night—a constant dread of exposure. In her waking hours, and in her dreams, a shuddering remembrance of the scarlet mask pursued her.

She thought of it now, standing there in her ball dress, with the flow of the river in her ears, and of that terrible night in Paris; and her cheeks whitened beneath their rouge, and her limbs shook under her.

"But for that dread, my life would be perfect," she mused; "but why borrow trouble? He may never come to accuse me, and even if he does gold will buy his silence. Ah," and her eyes swept the illuminated expanse of hill and wood, and stately mansion, "if they were well out of the way all this princely wealth would be mine, and my son's, and I could do as I willed. It must be mine, I will not lose it! One poor, puny, crippled body between me and the soul of my ambition!"

She turned her lips apart, a baleful glitter in her eyes, and face to face she met her Mephistophiles.

He bowed to her very feet, and catching her hand carried it gallantly to his lips.

"Count De Boganville," she gasped, her lips growing ashen.

"My dear Mrs. Lauderdale, you look resplendent! I trust you are glad to see me! I come in your hour of need, as an obliging Mephistophiles should; be candid now, and confess that you have need of me."

Her eyes fell before his keen, mocking gaze, but she answered lightly:

"Whether I have need of you or not, you are here. Come on to the house, we are having the great shooting ball to-night, and numbers of your old friends are present."

"One moment: we may not get another chance for private speech. Mrs. Lauderdale, I am growing impatient. I don't intend to wait seven years for my wife as Jacob did. You must put that old dotard out of the way."

She looked at him, her eyes as evil as his own.

"There are others in the way besides the old dotard," she answered.

"They must go, too," he replied, with a light laugh, "we must have the way clear. I'll provide the means, and you shall use them. You won't have any scruples, of course; I wouldn't trust to any other woman; I've had proof of your ability; you know!"

"Hush," she said; "remember your promise—the past must rest!"

"So be it, as long as you keep to the letter of the law. I've told you I'm growing impatient; we must hurry up the cakes, and make the funeral baked-meats come in for our wedding dinner. In the meantime I'm out at the elbows, and out of money. I want five thousand down."

"You shall have it," she said, sullenly.

"All right," he laughed, his keen, sinister face full of wicked enjoyment, "and don't spoil your beauty by frowning, my love. I am not unreasonable; only think of the years I've held my tongue; any other man living, having witnessed what I did, would have blurted out the whole story long ago; and that lovely throat of yours, instead of being encircled with diamonds, would have—"

"Will you hold your impudent tongue?" she interrupted, stamping fiercely.

"I will, I beg your pardon—to-morrow morning I want the five thousand; not a sou less will do; and here is a present for you; I brought it all the way from Vienna."

He drew a small, triangular box from his breast, and put it in her hand. It was made of ebony, and all starred and gilded with gold.

"Touch the spring," he said, "and you'll find something useful within. One tiny drop will do the work, and no one will ever be the wiser. Don't forget."

She took it, and hid it in her breast without a word.

"Come," she said then, "I shall be missed."

He offered her his arm and they proceeded to the house together. The music was in full chorus, and the dancing-hall filled with whirling couples. On the veranda, they met Mr. Lauderdale and his daughter.

"My dear," he cried, "where in the world have you been hiding? I've been hunting you everywhere."

"I've been to Paris after Count de Boganville, and here he is," laughed Cassie.

Her husband bowed gravely; he was not at all partial to the French count.

"This is my daughter, Miss Lauderdale," continued Cassie.

Agnes came forward in her lustrous white robes, the starry forget-me-nots crowning her bright head. The Frenchman bowed to her feet.

"*Mon Dieu!* what a vision of loveliness!" he said, as his hostess swept on to the drawing-rooms, "she's divine; I never dreamed of a creature half so lovely."

Cassie bit her red lips fiercely.

"Even he admires her," she thought; "no one has a glance for me, when she is present; I won't endure it!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FATAL TEST.

THE ball was a great success. Every one present was delighted, and Count de Boganville's opportune arrival greatly enhanced the universal satisfaction. He made himself wonderfully agreeable, and was the lion of the evening.

Mr. Napier, still white and weak from the effects of the duel in Paris, met his mortal foe with nonchalant indifference. They exchanged greetings after the manner of men of the world; and no one present, who had not heard of that Parisian episode, would ever have dreamed that these two men had stood eye to eye in deadly combat, thirsting for each other's blood.

The count made himself unusually agreeable, and succeeded in dancing two or three times with Miss Lauderdale, and his admiration for her was so manly expressed that Mr. Lauderdale, who was not wholly in the dark, touching the French duel, and was not at all partial to the gallant French noble, determined to put a speedy end to all trouble in that quarter.

Accordingly, as soon as breakfast was over the following morning, he went in search of his wife. She was not to be found in the drawing-rooms, and he went out into the grounds. On the front terrace sat Harry in his portable chair, with Agnes as usual at his side; no gayety or company ever caused her to neglect her invalid brother. Seeing her father, she ran down the steps.

"Papa, dear, one minute. Can you tell us what has become of Mr. Falkland? It is long past his usual hour for coming, and he promised to be early this morning, to give Harry time for a drive."

The father's heart thrilled with pain as he looked at his child's flushed and eager face. Down below, the grounds were filled with guests; she cared for none of them, and only waited for the coming of her brother's tutor.

How should he tell her the truth?

She saw the troubled hesitation in his face, and her cheek grew pale.

"Oh, papa," she cried, "has anything happened to Mr. Falkland? Is he ill?"

He took her two hands, and drew her close to him.

"My darling, no," he said, gently. "Mr. Falkland is quite well, but he is not coming any more."

"Not coming any more, papa?"

"No, Aggie. He is going away, and, my love, I think it wiser to get another tutor for Harry."

She tried to speak, but the words died away on her white, quivering lips; she looked up at her father, and seeing the pity in his eyes, a sudden tide of hot crimson deluged her face, and she darted from him like a frightened bird.

"Poor Aggie; she has deserved a better fate than this," thought the father, as he descended the terrace steps, and approached his son.

The crippled boy looked up at him with bright, questioning eyes; by a keen instinct he knew what had happened.

"My son, Mr. Falkland has gone," said his father, "he will leave the neighborhood to-day; as soon as I can find a suitable person, his place shall be filled; I hope you will not miss him a great deal."

"Whether I miss him or not, father, is of small consequence, but are you sure you have acted wisely in this?"

"I am sure, my son—sure beyond a doubt—there was no other way out of the trouble."

The youth sighed deeply.

"I've known this for some time, father," he said, "and I hoped it would end well. Poor little Aggie!"

"Hush!" said Mr. Lauderdale, his voice hoarse with pain; "never let her dream that you suspect the truth—there was no other alternative. Falkland said so himself; we must make her forget him."

"That's more easily said than done, with a girl of Aggie's temperament, father," replied the boy, sadly.

Mr. Lauderdale turned away, and renewed his search for his wife.

"Have you seen Mrs. Lauderdale lately, Lord Beresford?" he asked, passing a group of smokers on the lawn.

"I have, sir," responded the young man. "She went down the laurel walk yonder, not twenty minutes ago."

Towards the laurel walk Mr. Lauderdale bent his steps. He went on slowly, his brows knit, his hands locked behind him, as was his habit when he was particularly worried, his thoughts centered on his little daughter and her trouble. He had almost forgotten Count de Boganville.

"We must send her away for awhile," he was thinking, as he plunged into the shaded walk. "If she and Harry could take a trip together she'd like it, and it would divert her mind. Poor, foolish little girl; I think I'll tell Cassie about it. She might suggest some plan, she's so clever."

He had reached the heart of the grove; the walk ran through thick-growing laurels, and the shade was dense and green, and almost as dark as twilight.

He was just on the point of calling his wife, when the sound of her voice reached his ears.

"I tell you this is all I have; can't you wait a day or an hour?"

"Not a minute longer than suits my pleasure and convenience, Mrs. Lauderdale."

"What if I refuse to get the money at all?" said Cassie, angrily.

"Shall I tell you, my beauty? Before another sunset the world shall hear the secret I have kept so long, that's all."

This last voice was Count De Boganville's. Mr. Lauderdale stood like one turned to stone.

"I'll get it as soon as I can," continued Cassie, her voice tremulous; "don't bully and threaten me, Count De Boganville."

"I have no such intention, Mrs. Lauderdale. You ask me a plain question and I give you a plain answer; but we won't waste words. I want four thousand dollars more; Tuesday night I return to Paris; Tuesday evening at seven o'clock I shall be at this spot again, to receive it. Don't disappoint me, Mrs. Lauderdale."

"I won't if possible; sooner or later you shall have it, never fear."

"I don't fear, madame; if there's any fear it is on your side; don't forget that, Mrs. Lauderdale. The sword of Damocles hangs over your head, not mine, and unless you do my bidding I'll sever the hair and let the sword fall. Bear in mind how long and faithfully I've kept your secret, and bestir yourself a little to oblige me. I must have the four thousand Tuesday evening at seven o'clock sharp. Meanwhile, what's to be done must be done before I come again; do you understand that, Mrs. Lauderdale? The way must be clear of obstacles. That little gift I brought you from Vienna is all you need; it is as true as steel, and if you are as clever as I take you to be, there'll be no after trouble. But remember one thing, what I told you a minute ago, not a hair of Miss Lauderdale's head must suffer. I may change my mind, and make her Lady De Boganville in the end, there's no telling. I'm awfully in love with you, my dear, but a Frenchman's heart is like a weathercock, and Miss Lauderdale is an angel."

"I won't stand here and be insulted," cried Cassie, her temper up, and parting the laurel boughs, she hurried away.

Count De Boganville strode off in the opposite direction, laughing audibly.

"She'll not dare to disappoint me," he said, half aloud, "she'll keep the tryst, and pay the money down in my hand. She's a spirited filly, but I've got the bit in her mouth, and I intend to keep it there."

In the green gloom of the laurels, Mr. Lauderdale stood alone, his face ashen white, his knees in a tremor, only one thought throbbing through his bewildered mind; the wife he loved better than his own life was false. He sank down upon his seat, and his head fell into his hands; an agony like the pain of death filled his soul.

"If I could have died—oh, if I could have died in ignorance of this," he almost sobbed, and for hours he sat there, too utterly wretched to feel indignant at his wrongs.

After time would bring the mad rage of jealousy and betrayed honor.

Meanwhile stung to the quick by the count's insolence, Cassie made her way to the house; passing by her guests, who were sauntering in the grounds, in silence, and hurrying in, and up to her chamber.

She found her mother on the sofa in the bay window, with a novel in her hand, and a pet dog at her feet.

"Well," questioned the fair old lady, looking up, "what's the programme for to-day? Do you drive or sail?"

"Neither," snapped Cassie, seating herself moodily by the window, "I shall stay indoors."

"Which means that you've got a fit of the sulks," laughed mamma; "my dear, what's the trouble? Is that pretty daughter of your husband's winning your admirers from you? Don't sulk over it! Ill temper is ruinous to beauty; remember that vulgar old saying, which tells us that a drop of honey will draw more flies than a gallon of vinegar! I'll grant that it is provoking, but sulking won't mend matters. Can't you marry her off your hands, or coax Lauderdale to send her out of the house? In your place I could manage it. It is wonderful how she attracts the men; every one in the house is in love with her, De Boganville not excepted."

Mrs. Lauderdale answered not a word; she sat with her hands locked, her brooding eyes fastened on the river, her white teeth buried in the scarlet softness of her lip.

"I thought we were to have a sail, this fine morning," continued her mother; "but the men are off in the coppice, I hear their guns now, and when men get game in view they lose sight of everything else under the sun. I foresee that the day will be a drag; so I'll drive over to Flavia's for lunch, and do a little shopping. Cassie, my dear, how much money can you spare me this morning?"

"Not one penny."

Mamma opened her eyes wide.

"Why, what does that mean?"

"It means that my purse is empty; there it is, see for yourself."

She tossed the elegant trifle across the room. The old lady spurned it from her with her dainty foot.

"Have you quarreled with Lauderdale?" she asked; "why don't he replenish you?"

"I don't choose to ask him."

"Oh, very well, I can go to Flavia, her husband never denied her," said mamma, wickedly, as she rang the bell; "she'll supply my wants; while I'm at it shall I ask her to let you have a small loan, my dear?"

"Hold your tongue and let me alone," cried Cassie, furiously.

Mamma adjusted her white puffs and donned her lace bonnet with charming serenity.

"Good-bye, my love," she said, as she rustled out and down the stairs. "I hope to find you in a better temper when I return."

For a full hour Cassie did not move, or turn her brooding eyes from the distant river, and that same curious change that had come over her face when she sat watching in the old river house on the night of Romney Lysle's murder, crept over it now.

Her eyes grew hard and brassy, her lips settled into a cruel line, like the woman we read of in the fairy legend, who was possessed of a devil, and went to and fro, wearing the fiend's image on her face.

Mrs. Lauderdale's lovely face reflected the terrible purpose that was shaping itself within her soul.

She arose, and opened a drawer in her pretty, inlaid dressing-table, and took out the queer, triangular-shaped box that Count De Boganville gave her the night before.

She turned it over and over in her white fingers, eyeing it with a sort of fascination; at last she touched the spring; the lid flew up, revealing a small case, which contained a tiny crystal bottle.

She took it out, and held it up to the light. The stopper was sealed with gold, and the liquor within was perfectly colorless.

"I wonder if he told me the truth," as she unsealed the stopper.

When she removed it, a strong, curious odor filled the room. She went to the door, and turned the key in the lock; then her eyes glittering wickedly, she crossed to the little stand beside her mother's lounge in the bay window, and took out a large comfit from the gilded box that never was empty.

"I'll test its powers," she said, letting a few bright drops fall from the tiny flask, upon the sugar plum.

"Here, Fanchon," she called then.

The little, white favorite jumped from her cushion, and came running up, jingling all her golden bells.

"You pampered beast," laughed Cassie, cruelly, "I wonder if your dainty palate will relish this?"

She tossed the candy at the dog; the little creature caught it dexterously, and swallowed it at a mouthful; then she sat on her haunches, and jingling her bells, whined for more.

Mrs. Lauderdale laughed again, and pushed her aside with her foot.

Fanchon retreated to her cushion, snarling indignantly, and in less than twenty minutes by the Swiss clock on the mantle she was dead.

"He told me the truth," muttered Mrs. Lauderdale, returning the bottle to its case; "this will work swift and sure. Heavens above," and her black eyes glowed, "the pleasure it would give me to let Count de Boganville himself have a little taste! I think I shall try it."

She concealed the box in her bosom, and putting on her hat, and a trailing cashmere shawl, she took up the limp body of the little dog, and tucking it under her arm, left the house.

The day was fine; the sun shone with a mellow luster, the Autumn air was keen and fresh, and the golden foliage of the oaks and maples rustled softly overhead, but the grounds were deserted. The ladies were all indoors, and the incessant crack of rifles from the south coppice told what the gentlemen were doing.

Mrs. Lauderdale looked hurriedly about in the drifting leaves, until she found a stone; this she attached to the dog's body by means of a bit of scarlet ribbon taken from her own waist. Reaching the fish pond she looked sharply in every direction, and seeing no one about, she threw poor Fanchon in. As the little animal disappeared a hand touched the lady's arm.

"My dear, what are you doing?" asked a voice at her elbow.

She wheeled round with a great start, and stood face to face with her husband.

"What are you doing?" he repeated, his grave, troubled eyes bent upon her face. "What did you throw in the pond?"

For the space of a minute Cassie's self-command failed her, her lips grew white and twitched nervously when she tried to speak, and she felt her knees shaking under her.

In another breath she faced the danger bravely, remembering all that was at stake.

"Dear me," she said, linking her arm in her husband's, "can't one have the shadow of a secret in this house? I hoped no one would see me; but you'll not betray me, of course. Such a terrible thing as I've done! You know mamma's pet, pretty little Fanchon? I went to shut the door a little while ago, and the little fool darted right under my feet, and was caught by the neck and killed instantly. I never was so grieved at anything. I can't tell mamma; she would never forgive me, she was so fond of the little creature. I've thrown her in the pond, and mamma shall think she has strayed away. You won't betray me, dear?"

"I shall not betray you, but it would be better to tell the truth about the matter. I don't like secrets or concealments, they always lead to trouble in the end."

Something in her husband's face and manner made Mrs. Lauderdale's heart leap. What was out? She grew horribly sick for an instant. Could it be possible that he suspected her?

"Neither do I, as a rule," she replied, "but I can't tell mamma; and such a concealment is harmless."

Mr. Lauderdale said no more, but there was something unusual in his manner, which made his wife feel uneasy.

"What is the matter?" she asked, hanging on his arm. "Does anything trouble you?"

"A good many things trouble me at present."

"Tell me about them; perhaps I can comfort you."

He laughed a curious, bitter laugh.

"No, I am sure you cannot; for the present let my troubles rest. Are you going back to the house?"

She gave his arm an affectionate little pressure.

"My poor, dear love, you look so warm and worried, and I've been neglecting you so of late. Is that what troubles you? Forgive me, dear, I won't do so again. I am giddy, and vain, and thoughtless, and fond of gayety, but I am always true at heart to my dear, generous husband."

He answered not a word; his white, stern lips were rigidly set, his eyes held worlds of suppressed pain. His wife watched him furtively. He is troubled on his daughter's account, she thought, that's what ails him; and a pang of envy and hatred filled her soul. Even with him, Mrs. Lauderdale was first.

"How delicious the day is," she went on, still clinging fondly to his arm; "shall we have a little walk down to the river? What a noise our friends are making with their firearms in the coppice; there'll not be a pheasant left. I wonder you are not with them, you are so fond of the sport."

"I am in no humor for sport to-day."

"Are you not well, love?"

"I am well enough."

"Then don't wear such a gloomy face—our archery party comes off this evening; you are fond of archery!"

"I was fond of it once."

"Then you must be fond of it now. I won't have you turning an old man on my hands. I expect to distinguish myself this evening; win the silver cup maybe, and you must be there to see."

He went on in utter silence.

"Speaking of parties," continued his wife, desperately, "reminds me of a scheme that Aggie and I have at heart. We want to get up some private theatricals if you don't object? You won't of course, and the dear girl seems quite pleased at the idea. She's been a trifle low-spirited to-day. Did you notice it?"

"No, I have scarcely exchanged a word with her."

"And while I think of it, what has become of Mr. Falkland? It is something unusual for him not to put in an appearance. Romney was dreadfully put out at it. I wonder if he's unwell? I think I'll send over and see."

"No, Mr. Falkland has gone away."

"Gone away? Dear me, and bid none of us goodbye! What does that mean? He won't be gone long of course."

"There's no telling."

A little while before Mr. Lauderdale had thought to trust his wife with the secret of Aggie's sad attachment, but now his lips were sealed. She was unworthy; his own eyes and ears had witnessed that shameful interview in the laurel walk, and he was only biding his time, waiting to discover the full extent of her base treachery, before he let her feel the full power of his righteous wrath.

"Well, I'm ever so sorry," she chattered on, coming slowly, but surely, to the point she had in view; "we counted on him for our theatricals—he was to be our Lara, and Aggie his Kaled—and he must take himself off at such an inopportune time! By-the-by, dearest, we want some startling costumes, Aggie and I, and our scene appendages will cost smartly, too; we intend to have a stage in the south parlor, and I'm going into town to-morrow to engage the services of a real manager, so we may have rehearsals, and, I'm ashamed to confess it, my purse is empty. Upon my word I can't see how the money goes; it slips through one's fingers imperceptibly. I did give away a round sum this week, to be sure, I couldn't help it. There's a poor family in the village, and their little home was mortgaged, the father down with rheumatism, and the mother, poor soul, with a month old infant at her breast. I couldn't see them turned out into the street, so I paid the mortgage, and am penniless in consequence. You won't scold me dear?"

Mr. Lauderdale turned his sad eyes upon her lovely, excited face.

"Ah," he thought, with a pang as bitter as death, "if I could believe you—but I can never trust you again."

"I have never scolded you, have I, Cassie?" he asked.

"Never; you've been the kindest husband woman ever had; and you'll replenish my purse, and let Aggie and me go on with our theatricals?"

"Assuredly; how much shall you need?"

She colored, and laughed confusedly.

"Oh, I'm always needing so much, I'm ashamed to ask so often; and mamma's always wanting money; she's so awfully extravagant; I want lots—how much can you spare me?"

"Any amount, my means are not limited."

"Then let me have five thousand, another year's pin money, and have done with it."

Her eyes glittered eagerly, he felt her trembling from head to foot. His stern lips closed more firmly.

"Very well," he said, "make your purchases to any extent, and send the bills to me; your mother can do likewise."

She stood transfixed to the spot, the color coming and going in her cheeks.

"Why, can't you spare the money?"

"Not conveniently; and this will answer quite as well."

"But it is so awkward to have an empty purse," she faltered.

"Oh, well, here's a hundred and fifty in cash;

that will answer all trivial purposes, and you need have no hesitation about making your purchases—I'll foot the bills. Ah, there is my carriage coming round. I've an engagement at twelve; I must leave you at once; good-morning."

CHAPTER XV.

A CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS.

Mrs. LAUDERDALE sank down upon a rustic seat, when her husband was gone, and buried her face in her hands.

"What am I to do now?" she thought; "he has denied me the money. My jewels must go; there is no help for it; I dare not fail that wretch. Oh, Heaven! to be badgered and tortured in this way; to live under a curse, and never draw a free breath; one had better be dead! Only I could not die, the bare thought of death is horrible. What shall I do?"

She wrung her jeweled hands, and tears trickled down her cheeks.

"It all comes of one wrong," she continued, her eyes wandering toward the old river house dimly visible through the autumn foliage, "that one great wrong; I shall never forget it, never outlive it, try as I may; the stain is on my soul, it was an awful deed, it hangs about my neck like a mill-stone, and it will drag me down at last to shame and ruin."

"How happy I used to be in the old days of my girlhood," she went on, her transient remorse growing deeper. "How far back it seems when I was an innocent girl, and Romney loved me. Poor Romney! What a good husband he was, and I made his life miserable, and then murdered him! Murdered my boy's father! Oh, Heaven! and that wretch saw me do the deed! and one of these days he'll betray me, and the world will know me for what I am. What shall I do?"

An unutterable horror filled her eyes, and she beat her bosom like a mad creature.

"It was all love of dress, and wealth, and show, and mamma and Flavia urged me on. Mamma is more to blame than I am; she taught me to worship such things from the cradle, and if poor papa had lived it might all have been different. He used to teach me to pray; no one else ever did. It is too late to learn now. God would not forgive a wretch like me. I wonder if my husband would? He loves me. I wonder if I told him the truth—all the terrible story of my sin—if he could find it in his heart to pity and forgive me? or would he cast me off, and let the world know me for what I am?"

Her face worked with emotion; for the last time the good within her fought against the evil.

"I didn't intend to murder Romney," she wailed, in a voice of agony. "Heaven knows I didn't. Maybe if I told Mr. Lauderdale, he would forgive me, and save me; it is my only chance."

She was almost decided; her head sank lower; great convulsive sobs shook her from head to foot, and her tears fell like rain.

The sound of wheels on the drive broke in upon her reverie. She looked up and saw her sister's handsome equipage approaching the house.

"There are mamma and Flavia," she thought,—

"what would Flavia say if she knew? Mr. Lauderdale might not forgive me, and how she would exult over my downfall! I can't do it," she cried out. "I can't give up my splendid life and all the wealth I have tried so hard to win. I won't give it up," leaping suddenly to her feet, a fierce fire blazing in her eyes, a vivid color drying the tears on her cheeks; "I'll die first!"

The last struggle was over. The good angel of this unfortunate woman's life deserted her from that moment.

"She is joined to her idols," was the divine command; "let her alone!"

In five minutes she was in the drawing-room surrounded by her friends.

"What a fool I was," she thought then, all her transient remorse gone. "Why, I wouldn't do such a thing for worlds. Only one way lies before me, and I'll walk therein, no matter what the cost may be."

Mrs. Preston came with invitations for her soiree musicale, to take place on the following night, and remained for the archery party.

It was largely attended by the neighboring gentry, and turned out to be a most brilliant affair. All Mrs. Lauderdale's guests, and they were many, were present, and there was a good deal of sharp competition. Mrs. Lauderdale herself, in a wonderful toilet got up expressly for the occasion, felt sure of the prize, which was a pretty silver cup, and she would have won it, no doubt, if Agnes Lauderdale had not entered the lists.

The gentlemen, of course, held back, leaving the prize to be won by the best marksman, or marks-woman rather, among the ladies.

"Won't you try, Miss Lauderdale?" said Lord Beresford, who always kept as near Aggie as possible, and could not be induced to abandon his suit, though he had received a sound negative from her lips, on two occasions.

The game was half over, and Agnes, in her simple white dress, stood looking on. Her face had changed in the last few days; before Mr. Falkland's departure it was the face of a happy girl; now it was the face of a woman. Sad, but not hopeless, for even in her first great trouble, Agnes Lauderdale's noble unselfishness of character asserted itself; her sorrow made her tenderer, gentler, if possible more obliging; never morose or gloomy. If she suffered, it was in the solitude of her own room, in the depths of her hidden heart; to her friends, her sweet face was ever bright and cheerful.

She had decided not to attend the archery party, but Harry was anxious to go, and of course, trampling down any reluctance of her own, she was ready to accompany him.

"Oh, no, I think not," she answered to Lord Beresford's invitation. "I'll not try for the silver cup this time."

Her lips quivered slightly, as she spoke, for she was thinking of the last archery party she attended.

Mr. Falkland was with her and Harry then, and he had seemed so delighted when she won the prize. He was gone now, and she felt no interest in the game.

"Why, Aggie," cried Harry, from his low pony carriage; "why don't you enter the lists? Lord Beresford, she's a crack shot, Aggie is; she won the prize at the last party; she can send an arrow right through the heart of the target; she beats William Tell."

Lord Beresford renewed his entreaties, but Miss Lauderdale shook her head.

"Oh, pray, don't think me disobliging, but indeed you must excuse me, my lord."

Harry's eyes saddened as they rested on her changed face; he alone knew the secret of her listless indifference, and he felt it his duty to arouse her.

"Aggie, darling," he whispered, "won't you go to please me?"

She looked at him with her tender smile.

"Why, to be sure, I'll go at once, if you wish me, Harry."

"Ah me," thought the young peer, as he gave her his arm; "I'd give the whole of my possessions if she'd look at me like that."

Mrs. Lauderdale, in her startling toilet, black, dashed with scarlet, her skirts only below the knee, her graceful waist zoned by a scarlet sash; a jaunty cap, with a trailing scarlet feather, on her head, was ahead of all competitors when Agnes entered the list, and quite sure in her own mind of the prize.

But to the wonder of all present, who were not cognizant of the young lady's skill, Miss Lauderdale at her first effort proved herself a dangerous rival. The slender, white hand that held Bonny Belle's reins so dauntlessly, on the memorable day of the fox hunt, could send a dart right through the center of an apple, set up as a target, and Mrs. Lauderdale could not even hit it.

Of course, when the game was ended, Agnes Lauderdale was the winner of the silver cup. Her friends crowded about with congratulations, and her stepmother was loudest of them all.

"My dear girl, accept my congratulations. I'm gratified to see you win, even at my own loss. How clever you are to be sure."

Mr. Lauderdale's gloomy brow lifted; it pleased him to hear his wife speak so generously; but there was a look in Cassie's black eyes which made Agnes draw back from her with a shudder.

"I'm sorry I won the cup. I wish you had not urged me, Harry," she said, when she joined her brother; "mamma didn't like to have me win it; I know she didn't from the way she looked."

Harry laughed exultantly.

"Like it? You simple child. No! she would willingly take you for a target, this very minute, she's in such a rage! I knew you'd beat her, that's why I wanted you to try."

"Oh, Harry, why should I displease her?"

"Why should you please her? Aggie, when you've got a serpent to deal with, it won't do no good to pet and please him, he'll bite you while you're at it; set your heel upon his head and crush him down."

"Why, Harry, what can you mean?"

"No matter, you'll find out in good time. Come, let's go."

The soiree musicale was a most enjoyable affair, and largely attended. All Mrs. Preston's dear five hundred friends, and all the guests from Lauderdale Place were present. And Mrs. Preston, in a fever to outshine her sister, spared no pains or expense to render the entertainment perfect. The drawing-rooms were decorated in sumptuous style; arches of flowers illuminated by colored lights, surmounted every door and window; a foreign professor presided at the grand piano, a brass band filled the grounds with music, and a prima donna of the neighboring town was engaged to sing; and under a scarlet canopy erected on the lawn, a long table was laid, all a-glitter with glass and plate, and heaped with costly dainties.

Mrs. Lauderdale entered into the spirit of the evening with all the abandon of her old-time self. Her toilet was matchless, her jewels were priceless, and she was the handsomest woman present, for Agnes Lauderdale had remained at home with her brother.

Cassie reigned as of old, without a rival. She danced till her cheeks were scarlet, and her eyes like diamonds; she sung and her voice excelled even the trained notes of the prima donna; her old admirers, dazzled afresh by her beauty, flocked back to her feet, and filled her willing ears with words of adulation and flattery.

Mr. Lauderdale looked on, from his seat at the chess-board, with silent lips and gloomy.

"What have you been doing, Mrs. Lauderdale?" asked Harry Napier, "renewing your youth and beauty by the aid of some charmed elixir? I never saw you look one-half so well before."

Cassie laughed till all her perfect teeth shone.

"I am just beginning a new reign, and woe unto those of my old subjects whom I find false or changing," she replied.

Mr. Napier shrugged his handsome shoulders, and gave way to Count de Boganville, who came up to claim his dance.

"Your devoted subject," he said, bowing to her feet; "once your slave, Mrs. Lauderdale, your slave forever."

The music struck up with a crash, and resigning herself to his arms, she whirled away. Mr. Lauderdale did not move, not a feature of his stern, white face betrayed what he felt; he was biding his time.

"They are the best dancers in the room," said mamma, watching the pair as they spun away; "I always admired the count; I can scarcely forgive Cassie yet for not becoming Lady De Boganville; how the title would have suited her!"

"Bah, Lauderdale's money suits her better," answered Mr. Preston; "De Boganville's little better than a clever vagabond."

The dance over, Count De Boganville led his handsome partner to a seat.

"My beautiful queen," he whispered, leaning over the back of her chair, "you have conquered me anew to-night. You are the most beautiful woman that ever breathed, and my adoration will never waver again. Miss Lauderdale's an angel, as I said, but you are something better. Remember Tuesday evening, at seven o'clock, in the Laurel Walk."

Mrs. Lauderdale said nothing in answer, but her dark brows lowered, and her pearly teeth, set hard together, shone through her parted lips.

The dancing over, the prima donna sung again, and then the collation on the lawn followed.

Mr. Preston was a connoisseur in wines, and the best in his cellar flowed freely that night.

Mrs. Lauderdale got some old bottles of *cote-d'or* labeled a half a century back, and a cluster of tiny crystal goblets, and arranged them on the seat of a rustic arbor, with purple heaps of ripe grapes and piles of golden nectarines. Then she wreathed her regal brows with a crown of vine-tendrils hung with scarlet poppies, and yellow heads of ripe wheat.

"Who will come to my banquet?" she cried out, seating herself at the head of this fairy board.

Her friends came trooping up, Lord Beresford, and Carruthers and Harry Napier, and dozens of others, last of all the French count.

She welcomed them with the smile of a siren, and while they were crowding each other to be first at the feast, she tinkled her tiny goblets, setting them in a circle with swift, white fingers, and into one, the central glass, she let fall a few bright drops from a small bottle which she concealed in her breast. The act was so swift and sudden, that no one had time to observe it, and the gentlemen surrounded her in a glow of eager delight.

She gave them clusters of ripe grapes, and handfuls of nectarines, and dainty little cheese cakes, of Flavia's own making, and then she dispensed the wine.

"It is a rare article, gentlemen," she said, as she poured it out in bright, trickling streams, shooting coquettish glances hither and thither in the meantime, "half a century old, and rich as cream. Can't you detect the delicious odor? No such wine on the banquet board up yonder; Mrs. Preston never gives her *cote-d'or*, to her guests, she keeps it for herself. I purloined these bottles, and you shall share them; it is nectar, fit for the gods. Now, Captain Carruthers, now my lord, now Count de Boganville! Come up, friends, and help yourselves."

They crowded up eagerly, seizing upon the tiny glasses, and draining their contents with gallant toasts and compliments.

"Count De Boganville, you like it surely. Try this glass."

She took up the central glass, full to the brim, and offered it. The Frenchman accepted it, with a smiling bow. The rich color died out of her cheeks, and her bosom rose and fell rapidly, but Count de Boganville did not drink the wine. He carried the goblet to his lips, with a flattering speech, but leaving it untasted, he turned to his hostess.

"Mrs. Lauderdale, won't you drink a philopona with me?" he asked, his wicked eyes glowing with curious significance.

For her life, Cassie could not answer, but she submitted to the customary ceremony, and let his goblet touch her red mouth.

But she did not drink one drop.

The count laughed significantly.

"You do not drink the *cote d'or*, Mrs. Lauderdale," he said; "neither will I; let us offer a libation to the gods."

And tossing the little glass high above his head, he filled the air with a shower of golden drops.

The glass, broken at the stem, fell at Cassie's feet. She caught it up, and tossed it into a clump of rose trees.

"You've broken Flavia's glass, and it makes one of a choice set brought all the way from Peru," she said, "and you've wasted the precious *cote d'or* in the bargain, Count De Boganville. If you do not do better I shall be compelled to send you from the table like a naughty child."

The count laughed again, a laugh full of significance.

"Diamond cut diamond," he whispered, bending down to her ear; "you're a clever woman, my dear, but you've found your match. I don't think I fancy *cote d'or*. I'll content myself with grapes and nectarines."

"I have failed," thought Mrs. Lauderdale, driving home, when the party was over, "and to-morrow my jewels must go. There's no help for it, and I'd almost as soon part with my life as my diamonds! Ah, Heaven, if he had only drained that tiny glass, my future would have been secure."

It was after midnight by hours when she reached Lauderdale Place, and the great house was as silent as a tomb. Her guests went straight to their respective rooms, and to bed; Mr. Lauderdale locked himself in the library, without exchanging a word with his wife.

She took no notice of this, however; she lingered in the drawing-room some minutes after all had departed, pacing the floor restlessly, her jewels gleaming above her moody brows, her soul full of wild, wicked thoughts.

"I haven't a friend on earth to help me," she mused bitterly; "there's not a single one of my many admirers that I dare confide in; I can't tell

mamma, and Flavia would heartily rejoice to see me go to prison to-morrow, and Lauderdale; no, I dare not trust Lauderdale, I must fight it out alone. If Falkland were here," she continued, her eyes suddenly filling with passionate tears, and her voice faltering, "I could go to him. He would help and pity me, and keep my horrible secret. I am sure he would. I have never cared for any one living as I cared for him, since I used to love poor Romney. And to think, oh Heaven, to think, that she must come between us. Because of her silly, girlish fancy, he must be banished."

The tears brimmed over, and sinking down on a velvet lounge, she hid her face in the cushions, and broke into a perfect storm of hysterical weeping.

In a little while her emotion, always short-lived spent itself; she arose, dried her wet cheeks, and pushed back her falling braids and jewels, and went trailing up the stairs.

Her chamber door stood open, and looking in, she saw her maid stretched upon the floor, in the dressing-room beyond, fast asleep.

Another door, exactly opposite her own, stood ajar, and with a sudden gleam in her wicked eyes, Mrs. Lauderdale crept toward it.

"I wonder what the love-lorn damsel is doing?" she said, under her breath; "dreaming of her banished lover of course?"

She crept on to the door, her movement as graceful and noiseless as a cat's, and peeped through the crevice.

The chamber was lighted by a drop-light, suspended above a pretty table, all littered with gilded trifles; and in an arm-chair, all robed in misty white, her lovely hair rippling over her shoulders, sat Agnes Lauderdale fast asleep, with an open letter in her hand.

Cassie looked at her through the aperture, as a pantheress might look at the prey it coveted. Her black eyes glowed, and her white teeth shone through her red lips.

"I wonder if that letter can be from him?" she thought. "I must try and find out."

She opened the door softly, and gathering up her trailing skirts, she glided in, and to the side of the sleeping girl.

Her white hand held the crumpled sheet loosely, and her cheeks were all stained with tears, as if she had wept herself to sleep.

Cassie bent down and extricated the letter from the girl's passive fingers, and glanced over it with eager eyes. It was from Mr. Falkland, as she had suspected. A letter which, despite all the writer's efforts to the contrary, breathed something warmer than mere friendship.

A pang of terrible jealousy wrung Mrs. Lauderdale's selfish heart. This man had been her chosen friend, honored with her favor and patronage, and this girl had won him from her. This girl, who seemed destined to excel and supplant her in everything.

She crushed the letter into her pocket for more careful reading, and stood for an instant looking down upon the unconscious sleeper. The quiet, tear-stained face was very sweet and fair; the white, slender hands lay softly on the scarlet cushion of the chair; the misty white robe flowed far down upon the carpet, almost touching the silver fender, behind which the embers of a waning wood fire glowed.

Looking down upon the sleeping girl, a sudden thought flashed through Mrs. Lauderdale's mind, as her friend and chief counselor, the Prince of Darkness, suggested it.

She started, and flushed, and bit her red lips till the blood was ready to start.

"It would be swift and sure," she murmured under her breath, "and even if she escaped with her life, all her beauty would be gone forever."

One minute she hesitated, the horror of the deed she contemplated driving the color from her cheeks; and then she set her white teeth hard together.

"I'll do it!" she said in a sibilant whisper. "I've done worse, and how dare she put herself in my way!"

She bent down, and taking a small shovel that stood in one corner of the old-fashioned fireplace, she raked out the red embers until they touched the grate; then lifting the skirt of the sleeper's robe, she spread it over the fender, and over the smoldering fire.

The girl stirred in her sleep, and murmured softly; and Mrs. Lauderdale darted out of the room, and into her own chamber.

She locked her door in hot haste, and roused her maid.

"Get me undressed quickly, Fanchette," she commanded; "I am tired to death."

Fanchette rubbed her sleepy eyes, and did her best to obey. She removed the glittering jewels, and the silks and laces, and wrapt her mistress in a cashmere robe, and began to comb out her black braids.

Mrs. Lauderdale sat quiet as a statue; but her cheeks were white under their rouge, and her eyes full of terrible suspense and expectation.

"What was that?" she asked in a hoarse whisper, as a dog howled out in the ground below.

"Nothing, ma'am, only the dogs a baying at the moon," said Fanchette, as she brushed the long, black hair.

The little clock on the mantle struck three, and far over the river hills the first faint prophecies of dawn began to glow.

Cassie waited, her heart beating so rapidly that she could scarcely breathe. Had she failed again? No; a wild, shrill shriek filled the silent house with ringing echoes.

"Great heavens, what was that?" she cried.

Fanchette dropped her brush, and flew at the door, but some minutes elapsed before her shaking

hand could turn the key. The wild shrieks came nearer.

Mrs. Lauderdale pushed the girl aside, and burst the door open.

"Oh, what has happened?" she cried, rushing out into the hall.

A terrible sight met her eyes.

On the upper landing stood a woman's figure, wrapped in a sheet of flame. The guests came flying from their rooms, and Mr. Lauderdale caught his daughter in his arms, and tried to extinguish the flames; but it was Lord Beresford's thought that saved her from instant death.

He darted back into his room, and caught up a huge pitcher filled with water; hurrying back, he deluged the girl from head to foot, and extinguished the fire.

But her garments were almost entirely consumed, and her body was terribly burned.

Her father bore her back to her own apartment, and laid her down upon her little white bed.

Cassie followed him, her face like the face of a dead woman.

"Oh, Mr. Lauderdale, is she badly burned? In heaven's name, how did it happen?" she asked.

"Heaven knows," he answered, glancing at the red embers on the hearth. "I suppose her clothing took fire. Yes, she is dreadfully burned. I am afraid fatally! My poor, pretty Aggie! Let me go for a doctor."

"I've sent for one. Howard is already gone," said Cassie.

"Thank you," and he looked at her with grateful tenderness. "Sit by her a minute, till I rouse the servants."

And by the bedside on which her disfigured and unconscious victim lay, Mrs. Lauderdale sat down with placid indifference.

"I did not fail this time," she thought; "my shot was a sure one; she won't be likely to cross my path again."

And looking at the distorted, suffering face, she felt no remorse; she who had been once tender of heart over all human suffering; she who had once been a sinless little child, and prayed before the image of the Virgin Mother, at her dead father's knee. Her conscience was seared as with a hot iron, and her soul was given over to the dominion of sin.

"She'll die; the doctors say there is no hope at all," she announced, entering her mother's chamber, as the day was dawning.

The handsome old lady, wrapt in a Turkish dressing-robe, with her feet to the fire, yawned dismally.

"It is perfectly horrible being roused up at this unearthly hour," she answered, petulantly. "I shall not get over the shock for a week. What on earth could the girl have set herself on fire for? and she'll die, you say? Well, it will be better for all concerned if she does; if she lived she'd be disfigured for life, and in her grave she'll be well out of your way, Cassie."

Cassie said nothing, but her eyes glowed, and her cheeks burned, and a smile of exultation parted her lips as she stood at the window watching the rising sun.

"She'll be well out of your way," continued mamma complacently; "she was an amiable girl, to be sure, and I'm sorry for her, poor thing, but it is better as it is. I wish that crippled lad, who puts on such lordly airs, and wags such a sharp tongue, were as well disposed of."

"He'll be disposed of in good time," said Mrs. Lauderdale under her breath.

All that day, and for many days following, the soul of Agnes Lauderdale hung between life and death, and the agonies she suffered were indescribable. The great house was hushed and darkened, doctors came and went and her father hung over her bed in heartbroken despair. She was utterly unconscious all the time, and her wild talk was piteous to hear.

Her mind was continually running on Mr. Falkland, and she would tell him how much she and Harry missed him; and implore him to return to them, with tears running down her poor, disfigured cheeks.

"My poor child, my poor, pretty little Aggie," groaned Mr. Lauderdale, turning from the bed.

His wife, who was a constant attendant in the sick room, and devoted herself to the poor girl with a tenderness which won back all her husband's former faith and love, looked up with tear-filled eyes.

"He wrote to Aggie; Mr. Falkland, I mean," she said, as she drew a letter from her pocket. "I picked this up in the hall the night she was burned; she must have had it in her hand, poor girl. Oh, Mr. Lauderdale, why don't you send for him?"

Mr. Lauderdale shook his head.

"It is out of the question, my dear; he could do her no earthly good, and would not care to come. Give me the letter; it came inclosed to me. I am sorry now I ever let her see it."

Cassie gave him the letter, and then bending over the sufferer, she kissed her parched and discolored lips.

"My darling Agnes; and we were so happy planning our theatricals. Oh, it breaks my heart to see her thus!"

Mr. Lauderdale's eyes grew moist as he watched her. She was so beautiful, so graceful and seductive in all her movements, and her sorrow seemed so sincere.

"I wonder if I have wronged her?" he thought; "what could that interview in the Laurel Walk have meant? I'll find out! She does not look like a false woman—what power does that wretch hold over her? I'll wait! If the blame rests with De Boganville, his life shall pay the forfeit; and she? Oh, my darling, my darling! I'd give my very soul to prove her loyal and innocent."

Wholly unconscious of her husband's thoughts, Cassie arose from her seat at the bedside.

"She seems a little easier now; I'll send the nurse in, Mr. Lauderdale, and, if you don't object, I think I'll order the pony carriage and have a little drive; my head aches dreadfully."

"Yes, you are confining yourself too closely; go by all means, my dear, and you need not hurry; I'll remain here until you return," answered her husband, kindly, and as she arose to leave the room, he put forth his hand, and detained her.

"My love," he said, his voice unsteady, his eyes full of wistful love, "I can find no word to thank you for your kindness to my poor little girl, and, Cassie, if I have seemed unkind to you of late—"

He broke down utterly, and hid his face in his hands. She looked at him a minute with wide, wondering eyes, then she bent down and kissed him as she said:

"You unkind? Why, you are the best husband in the wide world."

Out in the hall, with the closed door between her and the sick-room, she laughed softly and mockingly.

"Bah! What a doting old fool he is! If I can only clear the way, and silence De Boganville, there'll be no trouble about managing him."

At the far end of the hall a figure confronted her. It was Harry, supported by his crutch, his worn, thin face giving evidence of all he was suffering. Mrs. Lauderdale laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"My poor Harry, you are on your way to Aggie's room. She seemed just the least bit easier, and has fallen into a doze. I wouldn't disturb her now."

The youth looked up at her, his dark eyes ablaze.

"I won't disturb her, Mrs. Lauderdale," he answered; "you seem quite anxious about my sister; will it rejoice you to see her recover from the effects of this terrible accident?"

"Why, Harry, what can you mean?"

"Oh, nothing," and he laughed mockingly; "nothing at all, Mrs. Lauderdale; you are not to blame in this matter of course."

"Me! What are you talking about?" and she gripped his arm, her face growing ashen white.

The boy looked her straight in the eyes.

"I saw you come out of my sister's room, Mrs. Lauderdale, not ten minutes before she rushed out all in a blaze; did you set her on fire?"

Her eyes fell before his steady gaze, her limbs trembled under her; for one minute her self-possession deserted her entirely; in the next, she was her own fearless self. The red blood leaped back to her cheeks, her eyes glowed with anger.

"How dare you accuse me?" she cried fiercely; "I'll make you repent it."

He wrested his arm free of her grasp.

"You'll make us all repent, and my poor father most of all," he said, as he pursued his way down the hall, "or regret, rather, that we ever saw you, Mrs. Lauderdale."

She looked after him as he disappeared, her eyes gleaming in the dusk light.

"You've sealed your own doom," she whispered under her breath, shaking her white fist after him. "I'll find a way to silence that sharp tongue."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE INTERVIEW IN THE LAUREL WALK.

TUESDAY came, and Mrs. Lauderdale had disposed of her precious diamonds, and had the round sum of four thousand five hundred dollars safe and snug in her pocket.

"I'll have them back again," she said, looking ruefully at her empty casket, as she sat in her boudoir, striving to pass away the lagging hours; "I'll have them back, and others more beautiful and priceless! It won't be long now before I am mistress of Lauderdale Place; mistress in my own right, with no living soul to come between me and my possession! I have worked hard, and my success is sure; one more move, and the game is mine, and my darling is heir of Lauderdale. Romney, where are you? Come here and kiss me."

The boy came in through the low window, his bright curls hanging about his flushed cheeks, his hands full of marbles and whip-cord; a pretty, promising little fellow.

His mother caught him in her arms and smothered him with caresses.

"Mamma's own pretty boy; you'll be rich, and own all these broad lands when you're a man; aren't you glad, Romney?"

"Don't, mammy, you chokes me. No, I ain't glad, I don't want no lands; I'm going to be a soldier and go to the wars and fight."

His mother kissed him again. He looked up in her exultant face with sad, questioning eyes.

"Mammy, is Miss Aggie so sick? Nursie told me she would die, and I'm so sorry. What made the Lord let the fire burn her up, and she was so good?"

Cassie put him from her and rose to her feet, feeling the first pang of guilt and remorse that her seared heart had known.

"Maybe she won't die. Run away to nurse now, Romney; mamma's busy."

The little fellow disappeared through the window, holding up his apron full of toys.

"I shall pray for Miss Aggie, and ask the Lord not to let her die," he said.

The hours went slowly by; the clock on the mantel struck six, and the doctors came in to look at their patient, who lay unconscious and dying, as every one believed.

The house was like a tomb; all the gay company had departed, and the grand rooms were closed and silent.

Up and down the hall, his hands locked behind him, his head bent upon his breast, walked Mr. Lauderdale. His son, sitting just without the door of his sister's chamber, watched him with pitying eyes.

"My poor father, how he suffers," he thought, "and how cheerful he used to be! This woman

brought misery and sorrow with her the hour she entered this house! Poor father, how blind he is, he trusts her still; and I cannot increase his wretchedness by speaking to him of what I suspect; I can't do it, yet I am sure I am not mistaken, as sure as I am of God's justice—I saw the guilt in her eyes when I accused her, and if Aggie dies, she shall answer for her crime."

The clock struck the half hour, and Mrs. Lauderdale came out of her boudoir, and entered the sick chamber. As she passed Harry, the two exchanged glances of hate and defiance, but neither one uttered a word.

Mr. Lauderdale, true to his purpose, even though his daughter lay dying, put on his hat and left the house.

"I must see him first," he thought, as he walked rapidly in the direction of the Laurel Grove.

He entered the cool, shaded walk, and drew near the rustic arbor. Count de Boganville arose from the seat and advanced to meet him. For one brief minute the two men stood eye to eye, and in that minute the Frenchman mastered the situation.

"The pig's out of the bag," he thought, as he bowed blandly.

Mr. Lauderdale did not move an inch.

"You are prompt, sir," he said; "I thought your appointment was at seven."

"I am always prompt, Mr. Lauderdale, when I have an important affair on hand. May I be permitted to ask if Mrs. Lauderdale sent you in her stead, sir?" retorted the count.

Exasperated beyond all endurance, Mr. Lauderdale sprang forward and seized him by the collar.

"You scoundrel, how dare you speak of my wife?" he cried. "You met her in this place on Thursday. I was here in the shrubbery, and witnessed your interview. Now, Count de Boganville, I ask you as a man of honor, to tell me what this means? What secret of my wife's do you possess?"

The count laughed softly.

"Sorry to disoblige you, Mr. Lauderdale, but I couldn't think of betraying a lady's confidence: as a man of honor, you surely would not ask me?"

The angry husband gave him a vigorous shaking, that effectually suspended the bland nobleman's breath.

"You met my wife, and you demanded money of her!" he continued; "by what right? I have come here to find out, and I will."

"Mrs. Lauderdale has a secret, a sort of skeleton in her closet, and she pays me not to betray her," gasped the count.

"What is the secret? out with it, or I'll not leave life in your miserable body!"

With what little breath he had, De Boganville laughed.

"Tell you the secret, and lose my hush money? What do you take me for, Mr. Lauderdale?"

"A scoundrel, a low sneak," roared Lauderdale, drawing a small riding-whip from his breast, "and I'm going to give you the finest beating that ever a cur had."

And before the Frenchman could make the least resistance, Mr. Lauderdale swung him round like a feather, and let him have the whip about his head and shoulders in a perfect storm of blows.

"Now, you villain, what do you say for yourself? Will you tell me the secret now?"

The count laughed again, though his face was livid with pain and rage.

"Yes, I'll tell you, Mr. Lauderdale, and in a way you won't fancy. Your wife sent you here to cowhide me, that she might save her money? Ah, well, she'll repent it! Don't strike me again; I'm not your equal in strength, but I'll make you weep tears of blood for every blow you've given me! Oh, oh, I'll have my revenge, and revenge is sweeter than gold. You shall hear the secret in good time, Mr. Lauderdale. You might have made me your friend and ally; instead you have made me your enemy, and I never forgive."

Mr. Lauderdale raised the whip with a threatening gesture, but the count, eluding his grasp, darted off through the shrubbery.

"You shall hear your wife's secret in good time, Mr. Lauderdale," he called back tauntingly.

Aggravated and perplexed, Mr. Lauderdale looked at his watch, and seeing that it wanted but a few minutes of seven, he threw himself down upon the rustic bench, determined to wait and see if his wife would keep the appointment.

"My wife's secret," he mused. "What secret can Cassie have? I wish I had throttled the impertinent villain, while I had my hands on him, and silenced his slanderous tongue forever. But I'll have it out, I can't rest till I do; I'll wait for Cassie, and make her confess the whole truth. Poor child, I haven't the least doubt but that cunning scoundrel has betrayed her into some sort of trouble; I can't believe she is false; I won't believe it until the truth is forced upon me."

His head fell into his hands, and he groaned aloud in his suspense and agony.

A shrill voice, calling his name, aroused him.

"Mr. Lauderdale, Mr. Lauderdale, are you here?"

He sprang up and rushed out into the open grounds. A maid-servant met him, her face white with terror.

"Oh, Mr. Lauderdale, come to the house, quick, for the love of heaven! She's dying, the doctors say she won't live an hour."

"Who's dying?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"Miss Agnes, and poor Master Harry fainted dead, and ain't come to yet."

The unhappy man waited to hear no more; he hurried on to the house, and found everything in confusion; the servants rushing about in a panic; the doctors in his daughter's chamber; and his son, lying on a lounge in the hall, in a swoon.

His wife met him at the door of Aggie's chamber.

"Try to be quiet and composed," she whispered, putting her hand in his, "everything depends on that. The slightest noise might prove fatal. You see how weak she is; the doctors thought she was gone a minute ago; and poor Harry was so moved, that he fainted away. The doctors say it is his heart; he can't bear excitement."

"Yes, poor fellow, he inherits the disease from me. I don't think he will be likely to survive his sister's death. Heaven help me!" Groaned Mr. Lauderdale.

She looked up at him with pitying eyes, brimful of tears.

"Oh, my poor love, how sorry I am for you," she whispered softly.

They drew near the bed, whereon Agnes lay, together. The poor, tortured frame was still at last; the white face looked like death, the slender hands lay motionless upon the coverlet.

"My poor Aggie," cried the father, "is she dead?"

The doctor, who stood, watch in hand, counting her fluttering pulse, raised a warning finger.

"Hush! No, she's not dead. On your life, don't disturb her."

The father sunk down upon his knees at the bedside, and hid his face in the cover; his wife stood by him, still clasping his hand; but when the great clock without struck seven, she disengaged her fingers and left the room.

Out of the house, out of the grounds and into the Laurel Walk she went with the step of an antelope.

She heard the village steeples ringing out the hour, but she saw no trace of Count de Boganville.

"I thought he would surely be waiting for me," she thought, as she sat down upon the rustic bench and waited, her hand clutching the roll of money which was to purchase his silence. "It is strange he is not here! Ah, heaven! if only something may have befallen him—if I could only see him put away in his grave, how secure I should feel."

The minutes went slowly by. Dusk deepened into twilight, darkness fell like a mantle over the silent grounds, and through the green laurel boughs shone the misty autumn stars. The clock over the stables struck the half hour, yet Count de Boganville did not come.

Mrs. Lauderdale waited patiently. "He will surely come," she said. But another half hour passed, again the village bells struck, and she was still alone.

She put the package of money in her pocket, and drew her mantle about her.

"He won't come to-night," she said, turning toward the house; "something has happened to detain him; he may come to-morrow. Ah, well, let him come! To-morrow I shall be mistress of Lauderdale Place, with a mint of money at my command; I can afford to buy his silence until some better way opens."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SECRET DISCLOSED.

MORNING came, the sun rose above the city spires and the green, circling hills; the birds awoke in the yellow oak boughs, and trilled their matin hymns.

In the silent house, the dying girl still lived, a faint breath stirring her colorless lips.

"How is she?" questioned Mrs. Lauderdale of the doctor, as he came out from his morning visit.

"She is alive, and that is more than I expected."

"And her brother?"

"Oh, he's all right this morning—on his feet again; but you'll have to be careful and not let him be shocked or excited; his heart seems to be diseased in some way, and a sudden shock might prove fatal."

Mr. Lauderdale turned away in silence to the window which commanded a view of his extensive domains, smiling beneath the glory of the opening day.

His heart ached with dull, hopeless misery. He had not spoken to his wife in regard to his interview with De Boganville; the presence of death in the house, throughout all the tedious night, had kept him silent, still his anxious suspense tortured him even more sharply, and was harder to bear than his anxiety and grief for his dying child.

He looked out upon the golden autumn morning with eyes that saw no beauty in the smiling face of nature.

"With all my wealth, I am the most wretched man alive," he sighed. "Heaven help me to bear my bitter lot."

Mrs. Lauderdale came tripping down the hall in the freshest of morning toilets, a waiter, on which a tempting breakfast was arranged, in her hand. She paused at her husband's side, and called to her house-maid who was passing.

"Take this in to Master Harry," she commanded, giving the tray to the girl, "and say to him that his father desires him to eat it; he is terribly in need of nourishment, poor boy. I don't think he has tasted food since yesterday morning. Come, my dear," she continued, taking her husband's arm, as the maid disappeared. "You must have some breakfast too; you must, indeed. It is all ready, and nurse is with Agnes; and I really think she is a little better, I do, indeed; she may get over it yet. In any event you must not give up so, Mr. Lauderdale; think of Harry; you heard what the doctor said; try and bear up for his sake, and for mine."

He turned round suddenly, and took her in his arms.

"Oh, Cassie, my dear wife," he burst forth, "I could bear the worst—I could submit to God's will, whatever it may be, if I were only sure of my wife's fidelity and honor. Cassie, Cassie, cannot you trust the husband who loves you better than his own life? My darling, I will not be angry. Trust me, put me, your husband, between you and that wretch, De Boganville."

"What do you mean?" she faltered, recoiling from him, her face growing white and rigid.

Before he could utter a word in answer, a furious peal of the door bell resounded through the house, and there was a sound of heavy footsteps and angry voices in the hall.

"What does all that mean?" gasped Mr. Lauderdale, hurrying away. "Who dares to intrude into my house in that way and my daughter dying?"

He rushed toward the door to ascertain the cause of the uproar.

Left to herself, Mrs. Lauderdale stood for a moment, her hands clasped, a look of wild terror in her eyes.

"What has he found out? What does he suspect?" she whispered.

The heavy steps were silenced, but there came a sound of subdued voices from the hall.

She looked about her like a wild creature at bay.

"Has De Boganville betrayed me?" she gasped out, and darted off to her own room.

She had barely closed the door, when a shrill shriek rang through the house, and Fanchette burst in upon her, with eyes protruding from their sockets.

"Oh, Mrs. Lauderdale, he's dead, he's dead!"

Cassie caught her by the shoulder, and shook her till what little breath she had in her was gone.

"Who's dead? Speak out, you fool, and tell me, or I'll kill you."

Poor Fanchette trembled in every joint; something in the face of her mistress filled her with shuddering horror.

"Master Romney," she faltered out, supporting herself against the door.

Her mistress flew at her again like a mad creature.

"Tell me what you mean, or I'll tear your heart out!" she hissed in her ear.

"I couldn't help it," wailed the frightened girl; "he was in Mr. Harry's room, as merry as could be, and he went to the tray and eat some of Harry's breakfast, and in a minute he fell on the floor dead; and there he lies now. Oh, dear! Oh, me!"

Mrs. Lauderdale had heard enough. With a stifled shriek she flew from the room. The hall was full of men in uniform, and she caught a glimpse of her husband's face, deathly white; but she took no heed. She went straight on to Harry Lauderdale's room.

There on the table stood the breakfast-tray, a few of the cakes broken, a chicken-wing half eaten, and the coffee cup drained, and on the floor, his pretty face convulsed, his chubby hands clutching his curly hair, lay little Romney—dead.

"Mrs. Lauderdale," said Harry, as the wretched woman took in the dreadful scene at a glance, "behold your work. I didn't want my breakfast; and poor Romney did; he ate some of it, and there he lies. Your evil deeds have recoiled upon your own head—you have poisoned your own child!"

A cry that might have been the wail of a lost soul, echoed through the house, and the miserable mother threw herself upon the floor, and clasped the child to her bosom.

"My darling, my little Romney," she moaned, "that I loved better than my own life. Oh heaven! what shall I do? Send for the doctors, they must save him!"

But there was no time. At that instant Mrs. Dunbar appeared in the doorway, her white crimps out of order, her handsome old face full of horror and amazement.

"Cassie," she commanded, stooping down and gripping her daughter's arm, "get up. I want to speak with you."

"Oh, my darling, my baby, my little Romney, he's dead."

"No matter; it would be well if you were dead also. Come, I say."

Impressed by her mother's voice and manner, Cassie got up and staggered out into the hall.

"The house is full of officers," said her mother briefly; "they are here to arrest you for Romney Lysle's murder."

Mrs. Lauderdale uttered no word or cry; she stood quite still, like one turned to stone, her eyes staring blankly before her.

"Do you hear?" continued her mother, "the officers are here to arrest you for Romney Lysle's murder—are you guilty?"

"Yes!"

As she gasped out the single word, she darted into the room where her dead child lay.

"My darling, mamma didn't mean to kill you," she panted out in stifled accents, clasping and kissing the distorted little face.

In another breath she was gone. Out of Harry Lauderdale's room, across the hall and down a back stairway to the kitchen.

Passing through the housekeeper's room, she saw a shawl and bonnet thrown upon a chair.

Without pausing in her breathless flight, she caught them up and put them on.

Thus arrayed, she passed through the servants' hall, and out into the rear garden. The sun was just coming up, and all the rank verdure was heavy with dew; she went plunging through it, wetting her dainty slippers, and soiling her cashmere robe.

The servants stared after her, the dogs bayed at her heels, she did not pause. Through the garden, across the lawn, down the shaded footpath which led to the river she flew like a creature possessed, her face ghastly white, her colorless lips apart, her great eyes wide with terror.

On and on, and on, startling the birds in the underbrush and the rabbits in the hedges; making frantic leaps across rut and ravine, until she reached the river which separated her from the town.

There, for the first time, she paused; on the end of the rustic bridge she sank down, panting hoarsely for breath. Behind her lay Lauderdale Place, smiling under the glory of the morning sun; right above her on the hill towered the lone old house which was her home in the innocent days of her early wifehood; beyond the bridge lay the town and the railway station, from which an early train was steaming out.

She watched it with eager eyes.

"If I were only there," she panted, "if I could get aboard the cars; I have money, and I might escape them."

She leaped to her feet again, and went flying across the bridge. As she neared the opposite shore, from the shadow of some thick-growing alders, a dark figure arose and confronted her; a white, spectral face glowered upon her, a skeleton hand waved her back.

She uttered a stifled shriek, for the white face was the face of her murdered husband, Romney Lysle.

"Go back," he spoke to her, in an awful voice, "an avenging Nemesis is on your track; you cannot escape."

"Oh, Romney! mercy, mercy," she gasped out, but she did not stop; she rushed on; fear for her own personal safety, a guilty dread of justice, stronger even than the horror this ghostly apparition inspired. Right on, into the very face of Romney Lysle's ghost, across the bridge, and up the shelving bank into the town.

A second train was just leaving the station as she reached it; she did not pause to ask whether it was bound, she only got on board as swiftly and quietly as possible; she cried for very joy under her heavy veil, as she was whirled away.

Meanwhile, at Lauderdale Place, the greatest consternation and confusion prevailed. The house was searched for Mrs. Lauderdale, and she could not be found. Little Romney lay dead in Harry Lauderdale's room, and in his father's ear, as soon as he found an opportunity, Harry whispered his suspicions in regard to the child's death.

Mr. Lauderdale's wretched face could not grow one shade more ghastly, but he struck his breast with his clenched hand.

"Heaven help me," he groaned. "I am afraid my reason will desert me. Harry, for the love of heaven, keep silent; don't utter one word of this to a living soul. She is accused of one crime, poor creature, and she is gone; the officers are in pursuit of her. In the midst of deserved wrath, let us be merciful."

The youth bowed his head, and said no more. Little Romney was borne into another apartment, and robed in white garments, and laid out on his little white bed, and every one who came in to look at his dead face believed the verdict of the medical men, that the child had died of sudden convulsions.

The morning wore away, noon blazed above the excited town, and evening came. The story of Mrs. Lauderdale's flight and Mrs. Lauderdale's crime was on every lip. All night long the streets were filled with people, and when morning came, great placards, offering a reward for her arrest, were put up in noticeable positions, and the daily papers teemed with the wonderful story of her guilt.

It was Count De Boganville who accused her of Romney Lysle's murder, and he told his story in a masterly manner.

At such a date, and such a time he was forced to leave France and his ancestral home, on account of certain pecuniary difficulties, and being hard up for money, he took with him some very valuable family jewels. He had succeeded in disposing of all of them, except a set of diamonds, when he reached the town near which Mrs. Lauderdale, then Mrs. Lysle, lived. He made an effort to turn his diamonds into money in the town, but failed, and by mere chance he called at the old house above the river, with the intention of asking for lodgings for the night.

A tidy housemaid met him, and he introduced himself as a peddler with jewels to sell, and was forthwith ushered into the presence of the mistress of the house, a handsome woman and a vain one, he saw at a glance, and offered her his precious stones. She was eager to obtain them, and begged him to wait until her husband came home.

He did so, and lay down to sleep on a lounge in the sitting room, suspecting no danger or foul play. But he was a light sleeper, and late in the night a slight noise aroused him. He opened his eyes and looked about him without stirring. The door was ajar, and he saw his hostess peering in upon him. One glimpse of her face revealed her intentions. She meant to murder him and secure the diamonds. In a few minutes she withdrew, and ascended the stairs again, and he immediately arose and took his jewel-case from beneath his head, and concealed himself in a small closet that occupied a corner of the room.

He had not more than done so, when he heard a step in the hall, and a gentleman came in and threw himself on the sofa he had just left, making his overcoat into a pillow. He looked worn and jaded, and soon fell asleep.

Half an hour went by, and De Boganville was thinking of making his escape, when the door opened noiselessly again, and the mistress of the house again appeared.

She came crouching in like a pantheress, her eyes glowing like fire, and before he knew what she was going to do, she had stabbed the man on the lounge with a dagger which she had in her hand.

She stabbed him twice and in his struggles he fell over on the floor, breaking the dagger at the hilt. She sprang upon him, and turned him over, searching under his head for the jewel case, believing that the peddler was the victim, of course.

When she found out her mistake, and saw her husband's face, she uttered a terrible cry.

"Oh, heaven, I have murdered Romney!" and flew out of the room.

The witness left his place of concealment, and secured the broken dagger, which he produced before the court: a curious old weapon, stained with dark spots, and marked with Romney Lysle's family name.

In a short time he heard the murderess returning, and concealed himself again. She hurried in, and seizing upon the body, got it into an adjoining room and forced it through a casement that overlooked the river. A strange feat for a woman, but Mrs. Lysle was strong, and her husband rather a slight man. She got the body out at the window with comparative ease, and it fell into the river with a heavy splash. She then proceeded to remove all traces of the murder, and as soon as he found a safe chance, Count De Boganville made his escape from the house.

This was the substance of the accusation which was to cause Mrs. Lauderdale's arrest, and which filled all the morning papers.

Count De Boganville was held in custody, and the pursuit of the fugitive was continued throughout the following day.

Lauderdale Place was closed to every one save the doctors who attended Agnes, and one or two intimate friends. Mr. Lauderdale shut himself up in the library to battle with his terrible grief, expecting every hour to be called out to witness his daughter's death.

But, contrary to all expectations, Agnes Lauderdale lived, and when another twilight fell the doctors announced that there was hope for life.

Under cover of the darkness Mrs. Preston drove over to Lauderdale Place for her mother. The old lady was expecting her, with an array of trunks and boxes about her feet.

"I thought you'd come," she said quietly, "and got everything ready. I've packed all my things, and the best of Cassie's, though I can't find any jewelry of value; she must have taken her diamonds with her. We'll go, and you can send for the luggage to-morrow."

Flavia nodded.

"I would have come sooner, but I couldn't face the town. Such a disgrace as this is! But I told you, I warned you, mamma, what the end would be! I always felt sure that Cassie would ruin herself, and disgrace her friends. You know how often I've said so, and now—well, I don't like to say it, but it won't amaze me if she's found guilty."

Mamma shut her lips close as she stood before the mirror adjusting her lace veil.

"It doesn't matter any great deal; the disgrace is the same; and it all comes of making that miserable love marriage," she said. "For one, I can't say I feel much pity for her."

"Pity!" echoed Mrs. Preston, as they left the room; "we are to be pitied, not Cassie. I sha'n't care if they hang her, only for the shame. Ah, how often I have predicted what the end would be, and here it is."

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNMASKED.

ALL day long, changing from one train to another, Cassie Lauderdale pursued her flight from justice. She had no idea where she was going or what she should do. An insane desire to get as far as possible from her pursuers drove her on.

With the housekeeper's mantle wrapt over her gay morning robe, and the housekeeper's veil shading her ashen face, she crouched in the corner of the carriage, while the train flew on. People spoke to her, but she took no heed; she sat quite still; her hands locked, her white lips shut close, only one thought in her mind, and that a frantic desire to escape. Grief for her child's death, shame, horror, every other emotion was swallowed up in cowardly terror.

"They'll hang me, I must escape!" and on she went through all the golden autumn day, and through all the luminous autumn night.

At day dawn the train steamed into a quiet little village, and the passengers got out for an early breakfast. Faint from want of food, she crept out with the rest, and followed them into the inn where the food was served.

"Let me have some bread and a cup of coffee," she said to the hostess when the rest had been served.

The good woman looked at her curiously.

"Why, how bad you look, poor soul," she said, pityingly. "Are you ill?"

Cassie drew down her veil with a shiver of terror.

"Yes, I am ill," she replied. "Let me have the coffee; I'm in a great hurry to pursue my journey."

The landlady laid her out a nice breakfast on a side table, and she had just seated herself, when a man, wearing an official badge, stepped into the room.

He looked about him with sharp, inquiring eyes. The coffee cup fell from Cassie's shaking hand, and was shattered at her feet. She started from her seat, and was out at the door in a twinkling.

Like a lapwing she went flying across the inn yard, and through an open gate into a green clover field.

"What's the matter with that woman?" he asked, following into the yard, and looking after her.

"She must be some poor, mad creature," said the landlady. "See, she hasn't tasted her breakfast."

Through the clover field, and into the oak woods beyond, the wretched fugitive made her way as fast as her failing limbs would carry her. But she did not hold out long; exhausted nature gave way before she was half-way through the forest, and she sunk down at the foot of a great oak in a deathlike swoon.

A poor, pale, disheveled fugitive, she lay prone on the wet earth, she who had once reigned as an empress in the gilded salons of Paris.

A short time after her flight from the inn, another train came in, and a couple of men got off.

"Seen anything of a strange woman in these parts; dark, and very handsome, wearing an embroidered cashmere robe?"

The man with the official badge, still loitering in the inn yard, struck his hands together.

"That's her to a dot, by George! She was here not half an hour ago; I might have known she was a fugitive."

"She's a murderess," said the other. "Which way did she go?"

"Right through the clover yonder and into the oak wood like a hunted hare."

They hurried after her, and in a short time found her—dead, as they believed—at the foot of the great oak.

But she leaped up at the first sound of their voices with a frantic cry.

"Oh, let me go; don't detain me—I'm ill, and in such a hurry to pursue my journey."

"You must go back with us."

"No, no, no! I won't go back! See, I have money," producing a package of bills from her pocket. "You shall have all this, only suffer me to go on."

The officer shook his head.

"We don't want your money, Mrs. Lauderdale; we are here to arrest you in the name of the law."

But when they laid hands on her she fought and tore like a mad thing, and the officers were forced to pinion her, and to carry her back by force.

Another morning was dawning over the newly-awakened world, and the birds in the green groves at Lauderdale Place were filling the golden air with melody, when—all fettered and guarded like a felon—she who had once been the belle and the beauty of her native town, was marched down the quiet streets, and consigned to a cell in the old stone prison, there to await her trial for her crime, so long unsuspected and concealed.

When the next assizes came round, the case was taken up, and created the most intense excitement throughout the country. People flocked into town from all quarters to hear the trial, and to get a look at the beautiful prisoner.

The best legal talent that the country could afford was engaged for the defense. Mr. Lauderdale, while he had not a single doubt in regard to his wife's guilt, determined to do all in his power to save her; and scattered his money like water.

The trial opened with great promise, and the counsel for the defense was more than sanguine about the issue, when to every one's surprise and consternation, Mrs. Lauderdale utterly ruined her own prospects by pleading guilty, and making a full confession of her crime.

"It is just like her," remarked Mrs. Preston, bitterly, "precisely the course I should have predicted for her."

And before the trial closed she and her mother were on their way to Europe.

As a matter of course, Mrs. Lauderdale was convicted; and although her counsel did their best to mitigate the rigor of the law, she was sentenced to be hung.

The jury chanced to be composed of stolid men not susceptible or easily moved, and the prisoner's lovely, pallid face made no impression on them. She had murdered her husband, and she deserved to die, and they gave in their verdict accordingly.

The sentence was to take effect only a few weeks after the close of the trial, and to the wretched prisoner in her lonely cell those weeks flew by like hours. She had a mortal horror of dying; and when Mr. Lauderdale, in the infinite pity of his great, good heart, came to visit her, she went down on her knees at his feet, and prayed and implored him to save her life.

And he did all that could be done to avert her sentence, but in vain; the law refused to be bribed or turned aside from the beaten track of justice.

The autumn week glided by, and November came, and with it the dreadful day of execution.

Sitting in her cell, Cassie Lauderdale heard the river washing drearily on the sands, and the November winds wailing through the leafless trees, and above all, the sharp strokes of the carpenters' hammers, as they prepared the ghastly gallows-tree.

She heard, shuddering in every limb, her face deathly white, her great eyes wide and wild with terror.

"Kind, pitying men and women came to see her, but she did not heed them; the old pastor, who had known her ever since she was born, came with words of loving instruction, but she laughed in his very face, a desperate, mocking laugh.

"Don't come here to torture me, I suffer enough already, and it does no good. You know as well as I know, there is no hope for a wretch like me! The Savior pardoned the thief who hung beside him! Yes, but there is no pardon for a murderer. Go away and leave me. If you cannot save me from this awful death, there is nothing else you can do."

And the old minister went away exceedingly sorrowful.

The dismal morning wore on, noon drew near, and curious people began to throng about the prison.

Mrs. Lauderdale did not move, or turn her hopeless gaze from the grated window. But in one hand she clutched a tiny crystal flask, which she had kept concealed about her person.

"I'll wait till the last moment," she said, in a husky voice, "there may be a chance for me yet—Lauderdale is so rich, and gold can do so much; he may buy my pardon at the last hour; I hope he will; I don't want to die. But if the worst comes, I'll not give them a chance to hang me—"

Even while she spoke there was a sound of footsteps in the corridor, and her cell door swung open. She hid the tiny bottle in her bosom.

A gentleman entered and stood silent before her. She looked up at him and a cry of surprise broke from her lips, and her dull eyes brightened.

"Oh, Mr. Falkland, have you come to help me?"

"I have come to help you. I made up my mind to let you die. You deserve your fate; I thought to keep my secret forever, never to let the world know who and what I am—but my heart failed me. I loved you once, and you are the mother of my child. Cassie, do you know me?"

He swept his hand across his face, removing the false hair and beard he wore. She caught one glimpse of his face, and the prison rang with her frantic shrieks.

"Oh, Romney, Romney, have you come back from the dead to accuse me?"

"Not to accuse you, to save your wretched life. I am no ghost, but a living man. When you threw me into the river that night, I wasn't dead. My body drifted ashore, and an outward-bound craft picked me up. I was restored to life and reason, but had no desire to return home. I wandered off to the ends of the earth, but love for my wife, although she had tried to murder me, brought me back."

"I came as Mr. Falkland, and bought the old river house that was our happy home. I found you more beautiful than ever, the mother of a boy, my son. I hoped, nay I believed I could win you from your love of wealth and admiration; you remember that night, when I asked you if Romney Lysle could come back from his grave, if you would be glad to see him? You answered me no! You would rather have him dead, you could not be happy as a poor man's wife."

"Then I determined never to reveal myself to you, or to any soul living, and when you would marry Mr. Lauderdale for his money, I let you have your way; but I cannot see them hang you, Cassie, though you have blasted my life, and broken my heart."

Her wide, startled eyes had never turned from his face; crouching forward on her knees, she looked up at him, her lips apart, her breathing hoarse and hard.

"Romney, Romney, Romney," she gasped brokenly, "it is Romney! Oh, thank Heaven, I didn't murder you after all! Romney, I didn't want to kill you, I wanted the peddler's diamonds! I never intended to harm you; I loved you always, always! Come a little nearer; let me touch your hand! Oh, Romney, forgive!"

The last words died away in a hoarse gasp, and she fell heavily forward at his feet.

He raised her up, white and limp, and unconscious, a crimson stream trickling through her ashen lips.

She never spoke, never regained her reason again. There was no need of the gallows-tree, no need of the concealed poison; before the wild November night closed in, she was dead.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE END.

The *Lady of the Lake* was homeward bound from a long foreign cruise, and amongst many other passengers were Mr. Lauderdale and his two children Harry and Agnes.

Ever since the tragic events recorded in our last chapter, they had been wandering in foreign lands, and although Mr. Lauderdale's face wore a shadow which could never be lifted, his manner was genial and cheerful, as he sat on deck, under the shine of the summer stars, talking with his children.

"I'm sorry, Agnes," he said, when Harry had drawn a little apart, "but of course I won't insist on you; I've no desire to part with you, my dear, but Beresford's such a fine fellow, and he would be such a good match. One of the best names, and the oldest titles in England, and the grandest old baronial mansion. I was up there for a week's shooting, and it's a charming place. And to think how patiently he has waited all these years; I really wish, my dear, you would think twice before you refuse him."

The girl's fair face, still bearing traces of that terrible accident which had so nearly cost her her life, colored, and her bosom rose and fell rapidly.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, papa, but there's no use in thinking about it; all the thinking in the world won't make me change my mind; I shall never accept Lord Beresford."

Mr. Lauderdale sighed, and watched her with wistful, tender eyes.

"Ah," he thought, "Harry was right, she will never be cured of that old attachment, poor girl. She's not like other women! She'll never forget Falkland, though she knows all that miserable story of his disguise, and his real name, she'll never forget him. I wonder where on the wide earth he is, poor fellow. I pitied him, even while I blamed him for the course he pursued."

The summer stars dropped lower in the glowing sky, and the summer night drifted towards a golden dawn.

Somewhere amid the small hours there was a great bustle on board the steamer, and a shrill cry of fire!

Then followed a scene of dire dismay and confusion. The *Lady of the Lake* was soon wrapped in flames, and the passengers crowded the deck in wild panic, shrieking for help, and precipitating each other into the river.

The boats were lowered, and every effort was made to save them; but the fire had gained such headway, and such dismay and disorder prevailed, that very little could be done.

Scores of poor souls were forced to leap into the water, in order to escape the pursuing flames, and would all have perished but for the heroic efforts of the captain of a small craft lying out in the channel.

He sent out his boats and worked with such vigor

and unselfish daring, that very little life was lost. Amongst the very last passengers who left the burning decks of the *Lady of the Lake* were Mr. Lauderdale and his two children.

Harry got safely into the rocking boat, and Mr. Lauderdale was handing Agnes down, when her foot slipped, and she fell into the water. The boat shot off, and Mr. Lauderdale plunged in to save his child. But there was another before him, the captain of the vessel from which the boats were sent.

"Save yourself, sir," he shouted, and before the current of the burning ship had drawn the girl under, he had caught her in his arms, and was making his way to the vessel.

Mr. Lauderdale, with great difficulty, succeeded in saving himself; and on the deck of the rescuing vessel he received his daughter from her deliverer's arms.

"How shall I find words to thank you, sir?" he began, and stopped short in astonishment.

He stood face to face with Romney Lysle.

Two weeks later, after a stormy and perilous passage, Captain Lysle's vessel was nearing its native shores.

Mr. Lauderdale stood on the deck, looking towards the green land line with eager eyes.

"Well, there's home at last," he said, "and I'm glad to see it, though when I left five years ago I thought I should never care to return. Home is the best place after all, Captain Lysle."

"Yes, when one has a home. I have none, Mr. Lauderdale. I am both homeless and nameless."

Mr. Lauderdale looked at him wistfully.

"You are not going into port, then?"

"No, sir, I shall never leave my vessel's deck until I leave it for a grave in the sea. I have parted from the land forever. A man like I am has no right to a home in the midst of happy, hopeful people."

There was a long pause, then as the green hills drew nearer, Mr. Lauderdale laid his hand on his companion's arm.

"Falkland," he began, "I like you by your old name best; you and I have suffered keenly, and from the same cause. I felt very bitter toward you when I first found out that you were Cassandra Lysle's husband; but time has cooled my anger and healed my pain, and although I still blame you for many things you have done, I can forgive you. Let us shake hands. You saved my daughter's life, and that act makes me your debtor forever."

Silence again; the green, sunlit hills looming near with every motion of the bounding vessel.

"You saved my daughter's life, sir, and now I am about to ask you to do me another favor; will you grant it, sir?"

"If I can, Mr. Lauderdale, I will."

"You remember that I asked you to leave home years ago, Mr. Falkland, on my daughter's account."

"I remember, Mr. Lauderdale."

"Well, sir, I am about to ask you now to return home again for her sake."

Dead silence for some minutes, then the captain faced about, his features working with suppressed emotion.

"What do you mean, Mr. Lauderdale?" he demanded, his voice hoarse with excitement.

"I mean this: my daughter's happiness is dearer to me than my own life, and I can't see her fading away like a blighted flower. She could marry tomorrow one of the first men in England; but, Mr. Falkland, she is one of those foolish women who cannot forget a first love. I asked you to leave her once. I ask you now to go down and see her; she is in her state-room yonder."

The captain stood white and breathless.

"Mr. Lauderdale, what can you mean?"

"Precisely what I have said, sir; a word to the wise is sufficient."

"But you forget, sir, all my miserable past, all my shame and sorrow?"

"I forget everything but the love I bear my only child, and the desire to see her happy. Will you go and see her?"

Captain Lysle went without another word.

Half an hour later he returned, with Agnes leaning on his arm, her sweet face radiant with holy love and joy.

"Oh, papa," cried she, clasping her father's hand, "how happy you have made me, and I will make you both so happy now, that the past and all its troubles shall be forever forgotten."

Mr. Lauderdale only took her in his arms and kissed her.

Later, sitting under the stars, as they neared their native shore, he said:

"And you love this man so much, Aggie, you would sooner be his wife than to be Lady Beresford, of Beresford Towers, and one of the grandest ladies in England?"

"Yes, papa; I would sooner be his wife than be Queen of England. He loves me so, poor Romney, and I shall make his life so bright and happy, after all his trouble. Oh, papa, I am the happiest woman in the wide world."

And on his wedding morning a few months later, Romney Lysle, looking back upon all the woe and darkness of his bygone life, and seeing his bride's sweet face shining like a hope-star to gild all his future, thought himself the happiest man.

And with the wedding morning our story ends. Over the past and its sins and sorrows let the curtain of oblivion fall; and from what we have seen let us learn this lesson: Sin brings its own sure punishment, and Virtue never fails to win its bright reward.

THE END.

Waverley Library.

89 A GILDED SIN.

90 THE AUTHOR'S DAUGHTER. By Mary Howitt. BEADLE AND ADAMS, 38 William Street, N. Y.